



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

## **A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)**

### **Chapter 18**

### **The Doctrine of Law and Gospel**





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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.1 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### Two Kinds of Words from One God

In His love for the human race and in His desire to rescue us from the condemnation we deserve, our all-wise and merciful God has chosen to speak to mankind with two kinds of words or messages. Both come from the same mouth or source and are equally God's Word. Both are necessary for our salvation, but in totally different ways. One of these words is intended to knock us down, and the other word is intended to lift us up.

The apostle Paul describes these two kinds of speaking and their functions in his second letter to the Christians in Corinth: "**Our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life**" (2 Corinthians 3:5-6). The two kinds of speaking are called "**the letter**" and "**the Spirit**". Notice that the letter "**kills**". but the Spirit "**gives life**". Notice also that "**the new covenant**" is not a covenant of the letter, but a covenant of the Spirit. The fact that there is a new covenant implies that there was an old covenant, and, as we shall see, the old covenant is "**the letter**" that kills.

In the words that follow, the apostle makes his meaning clear. He says: "**But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory**" (2 Corinthians 3:7-9).

Notice that the letter that kills is here given two different names. It is called "**the ministry of death**" and "**the ministry of condemnation**". On the other hand, the new covenant of the Spirit that gives life is called "**the ministry of the Spirit**" and "**the ministry of righteousness**". Now it becomes clear what Paul means by the letter that kills, that is, the ministry of death and condemnation. He describes it as something that was written and engraved on stones, and he refers to Moses. Thus, with the term "**letter**" Paul is referring to God's law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, which were written on two stone tablets by the Lord God Himself and spoken from Mt. Sinai by the Lord God Himself in the presence of Moses and the Israelites. It is the letter of the law that kills. It is the law of God that is the ministry of death and condemnation. For a full description of what happened on Mt. Sinai when God gave His law to His people, read Exodus 19:2 – 20:21.

But the law is not God's last word to His people. As glorious as God's law is, there is something much more glorious: "**the new covenant**", the speaking "**of the Spirit**", "**the ministry of the Spirit**" and "**the ministry of righteousness**". In contrast with the law, which kills, this kind of speaking "**gives life**". This kind of speaking gives us the gift of "**righteousness**".

The Gospel of John presents these two kinds of speaking in fewer words than Paul, saying only: "**The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ**" (John 1:17). Moses was the one through whom God gave to His people the righteous demands of His law (the old covenant). Jesus, the Messiah, is the One through whom God gives to us the blessings of His grace and truth (the new covenant).

In his letter to the Galatians the apostle Paul sharply distinguishes between these two kinds of speaking. He wants the Galatians to consider which type of speaking brought them the blessings of

the Holy Spirit. He asks: “**Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?**” (Galatians 3:2). Did the law give you the blessings of the Holy Spirit? Or was it that other kind of speaking, where God did not give you something to do, but something to believe? That is, “**the hearing of faith**”. Paul is referring to the grace and truth that has come through Jesus Christ, the good news of life and righteousness. Paul wants the Galatians to realize that it was not the law of God that brought them the Spirit and His blessings, but the message of grace and truth and life and righteousness.

Later in this same letter Paul calls this second more glorious way of speaking “**the gospel**”, as in Galatians 3:8. Thus, the first way of speaking is known as the law, and the second more glorious way of speaking is known as the gospel, which simply means “good news”. A message that gives life and righteousness is indeed good news. A message that kills and condemns, namely, the law, is bad news. But we must know the bad news before the good news seems good to us. The bad news is that God’s law condemns us to death because we have not kept it and in fact could not keep it because of the kind of people we are. But the Gospel is good news, because God sent Jesus to win for us righteousness and life, so that we shall not die but live.

In the Old Testament this Gospel is known as “**the promise**” (Galatians 3:14, 16-18). “**The Scripture ... preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, ‘In you all the nations shall be blessed’**” (Galatians 3:8). Abraham lived before Moses, and so the Gospel promise was already in effect before God gave the law through Moses. That is why Paul writes: “**The law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise**” (Galatians 3:17-18).

The inheritance that God wants us to enjoy is eternal life. How do we gain that inheritance? Is it by law or by promise? It cannot be both. Paul assures us that the inheritance was promised to Abraham, and he received it by believing the promise, not by doing the works of the law. The same is true of us as well. Paul says: “**So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham. For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.’ ... Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith**” (Galatians 3:9-14).

The law curses us because we cannot keep it. But Jesus was cursed on the cross in our place, so that God could keep His promise of life. The Gospel is the good news of Jesus and what He did for us. In the Old Testament the Gospel came to God’s people as a promise of good things to come. In the New Testament the Gospel is the good news that God has kept His promise, Jesus has come to save us, and we have righteousness and life by faith in Him, that is, by trusting in what He did for us.

Since there are these two different ways in which God speaks to us – law and Gospel – it is important for every Christian and especially for every Christian leader or teacher, to understand the difference between law and Gospel, and to know when and how to speak to others in terms of law and when and how to speak to others in terms of Gospel, always remembering that the Gospel is much more glorious than the law.

Paul wrote to Timothy: “**Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth**” (2 Timothy 2:15). His point is that we need to know how to handle God’s Word, and this means that we need to know, both for ourselves and for others, how to use God’s law and God’s Gospel in the proper way, in accordance with God’s will.

## Questions

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1. What are the two kinds of speaking, according to 2 Corinthians 3:5-6?
2. What are the two kinds of speaking, according to 2 Corinthians 3:7-9?
3. Which kind of speaking is more glorious?
4. Why is this kind of speaking more glorious?
5. What are the two kinds of speaking, according to John 1:17?
6. How did the Galatians receive the Spirit?
7. What makes all of us accursed according to God's law?
8. How did God rescue us from the curse of the law?
9. Why is the more glorious way of speaking called the Gospel?



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.2 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### The Similarities between the Law and the Gospel

Although the differences between the law and the Gospel are great, there are some similarities between them. Since both the law and the Gospel are recorded in Scripture, and all Scripture has been breathed out by God (2 Timothy 3:16), both the law and the Gospel have been given by divine revelation. The law and the Gospel are equally God's Word.

The first good news (Gospel) was spoken by God Himself in the Garden of Eden when He cursed the devil in the serpent shortly after Eve and Adam listened to Satan instead of listening to God. What God said was not good news for Satan, but it was good news for Adam and Eve: **"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel"** (Genesis 3:15). This was the first promise of the coming Savior, the Seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent and thus take away Satan's power and undo the damage he caused by seducing our first parents into disobedience.

This promise of a Savior was repeated many times during the long years of the Old Testament. Sometimes the good news was transmitted directly by God, as when He spoke to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 and said to him: **"In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."** But more often God spoke His good news through prophets whom He chose from among the people, such as Moses, Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel, all of whom spoke the good news God gave them to pass on to the world.

The law of God was spoken directly by God Himself in the language of the Israelites, for we read in Exodus 20:1-2: **"And God spoke all these words, saying: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage,'"** and then God spoke the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai. God's voice from Mt. Sinai frightened the people, and **"they said to Moses, 'You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die'"** (Exodus 20:19). God then gave the rest of His laws to Moses, and Moses then conveyed God's words to the people. Most of the time in the Old Testament God used prophets like Moses to speak His law to His people. Before Moses died, he reminded the Israelites of that experience at the foot of Mt. Sinai, saying to them: **"The LORD talked with you face to face on the mountain from the midst of the fire. I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the fire"** (Deuteronomy 5:4-5). But whether God spoke the law Himself or transmitted His law through prophets, the law of God as given in Scripture is the Word of God, just as the Gospel was and is the Word of God.

Another similarity between the law and the Gospel is that both law and Gospel apply to all persons who have ever lived on earth, past, present, and future. Even though God did not speak the Ten Commandments until the time of Moses, the law of God was there from the beginning. We are told by the apostle Paul that the Gentiles, the non-Jews, who did not hear God speaking the law to them, nevertheless had **"the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them"** (Romans 2:15). In other words, all persons on earth have a sense of God or a divine being in their inmost hearts, and an awareness within them that they are accountable to this God. And because this law is written in their hearts, they have a sense of right and wrong, so that when they do wrong, their thoughts accuse them, and when they do right, their thoughts excuse them.

There was a difference between the Jews and the Gentiles, since the Jews had the written laws of Moses, and the Gentiles did not. But because of this law written in the hearts of all, Paul says: **“For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law”** (Romans 2:12). The Gentiles will perish also, because the law written in their hearts condemns them, just as the law given on Mt. Sinai condemns the Jews. Paul therefore draws this conclusion: **“We have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. ... We know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. ... For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Romans 3:9-23).

The Gospel of the coming Savior applies to all persons also, for when God spoke the promise in the presence of Adam and Eve, the entire human race living at that time heard His words. The same was true after the flood when God repeated the promise of the Savior in the presence of the entire human race, which at that time numbered eight persons: Noah and his wife, and Shem, Ham, and Japheth and their wives. This universal promise was reaffirmed to Abraham and the patriarchs: **“In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”** (Genesis 12:3; see also Genesis 26:4 and Genesis 28:14).

That the Gospel is intended for and applies to all persons was most clearly stated by Jesus Himself when He said to Nicodemus: **“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved”** (John 3:16-17). The apostle Paul taught the same thing, writing to Timothy: **“God our Savior ... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all”** (1 Timothy 2:3-6). Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He instructed His disciples: **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”** (Mark 16:15).

Both law and Gospel are spiritual in nature, concerned not only with the external actions of persons but with the hearts and internal thoughts of persons. The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans: **“The law is spiritual”** (Romans 7:14). Jesus showed this in His Sermon on the Mount, when He pointed out that it was not only the outward actions of murder and adultery that were contrary to God’s law, but also lust and anger in the heart (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28).

Jesus also pointed out that the Gospel is spiritual, for in it and through it the Holy Spirit is at work. He said: **“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life”** (John 6:63).

Another similarity between the law and the Gospel is that both law and Gospel are intended for man’s eternal benefit. Even before they fell into sin, Adam and Eve were given the instruction: **“Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but 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 2:16-17). By keeping this instruction, they would have opportunity to show their love for God and their appreciation for God’s many blessings. Since they were created in the image of God, they had the ability to follow this word of God.

After they fell into sin, the law of God was still written in their hearts, but the perfect harmony between them and God was broken. Now any directive from God was seen as hostile to their sinful nature. The laws that God gave to Israel were given with the promise of life attached to them, but it was impossible for them to live up to God’s high standard. Perfect obedience to God was still presented as a way to gain eternal life. God through Moses told the people: **“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). The law in itself is a valid way of attaining life. That it does not produce life is not the fault of the law, but the fault of the persons who are confronted by the law, because these persons cannot and do not obey the law. God through the prophet Ezekiel reminded the Israelites that their problems were not God’s fault: **“I gave them My statutes and showed them My judgments, which, if a man does, he shall live by them”** (Ezekiel 20:11).

In His conversation with a lawyer Jesus reiterated that thought. The lawyer asked Jesus: “**Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?**” Jesus responded: “**What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?**” After the lawyer recited the two tables of the law regarding love for God and love for neighbor, Jesus replied: “**You have answered rightly; do this and you will live**” (Luke 10:25-28). All the lawyer had to do to gain eternal life was to keep the law. Jesus wanted this lawyer to realize that he had not kept the law and could not keep it. For that reason, Jesus then told him the account of the good Samaritan to make him recognize that he was far from showing the kind of love in his life that the law of God demanded.

The apostle Paul summarized the problem in these words: “**The commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death**” (Romans 7:10). “**Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good**” (Romans 7:12). There is nothing wrong with God’s law. It can do what it promises to do. The problem is not with the law, but with the sinner who is confronted by the law. Paul says: “**We know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. ... For to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find**” (Romans 7:14-18). Since the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, no human being has been able to obey the law in the way God wants it to be kept. It is for that reason that the law gives life to no one, even though life remains God’s reward for perfect obedience.

The only way God’s law leads to life among fallen mankind is in a negative way. That is, it crushes man’s pride and drives him to desperation over his inability to keep it, and thus makes a person not only aware of his sins but also of his innate sinful nature and his need for something else.

The Gospel, on the other hand, not only promises life but creates life and sustains life. Jesus said: “**As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life**” (John 3:14-16).

### Questions

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1. Show from Scripture that the law came from God.
2. Show from Scripture that the Gospel has come from God.
3. Show from Scripture that God’s law applies to all persons.
4. Show from Scripture that God’s Gospel applies to all persons.
5. What do we mean when we say that the law is spiritual?
6. Show from the Scripture that God’s law was intended to give life.
7. Why does God’s law not give life to anyone?
8. Why is the Gospel able to give life when God’s law could not?
9. What is the only way for a person to gain eternal life?



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.3 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### The Uses of the Term “Law”

The Hebrew and Greek words translated into the English word “law” have various meanings in different contexts. In many Old Testament passages the word “law” simply means God’s Word in general, without specifically referring to God’s commandments. This is especially true in the book of Psalms, as, for example, Psalms 1, 19, and 119. **“Law”** and its synonyms in the following passages refer to God’s Word, which includes law and Gospel, and sometimes more Gospel than law:

- **“Blessed is the man”** whose **“delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night”** (Psalm 1:1-2). Since his meditation brings forth abundant fruit, it is clear this reference is to the whole Word of God, not just the commandments.
- **“The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart”** (Psalm 19:7-8). The Ten Commandments do not convert the soul or rejoice the heart, but the Word of God does, especially the Gospel.

Psalm 119 is a long psalm in which almost every verse makes some kind of reference to God’s Word in a general way, including both law and Gospel. If we understand every reference to law or its synonyms as referring to the Ten Commandments, we will misunderstand what God is saying to us. These are the words that occur over and over in Psalm 119: **“law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, judgments, word, way, ordinances.”** Here are some examples:

- **“Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law”** (Psalm 119:18). We need special enlightenment to grasp the Gospel. The law is written in every one’s heart, to some extent.
- **“The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of coins of gold and silver”** (Psalm 119:72).
- **“Let Your tender mercies come to me, that I may live; for Your law is my delight”** (Psalm 119:77).
- **“Unless Your law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction”** (Psalm 119:92).
- **“I long for Your salvation, O LORD, and Your law is my delight”** (Psalm 119:174).

In all of these passages it would seem that the psalmist has the Gospel in mind more than the Ten Commandments. The same thing can be said about similar words such as **“commandments, precepts, and statutes”**, which occur in this Psalm.

Sometimes the word **“law”** is used to refer specifically to the Old Testament. When some of the people were beginning to favor Jesus and some officers even failed to arrest Him because of His popularity, the Pharisees said: **“This crowd that does not know the law is accursed”** (John 7:49). In quoting an Old Testament passage in a debate with Jewish leaders, Jesus said: **“Is it not written in your law?”** (John 10:34). On another occasion Jesus said: **“This happened that the word might be fulfilled which is written in their law”** (John 15:25). The Jewish people used the word **“law”** in the same way, saying

to Jesus on one occasion: “**We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever**” (John 12:34). They were not referring to the Ten Commandments but to the Old Testament. The apostle Paul followed the same usage, quoting an Old Testament passage after saying: “**In the law it is written**” (1 Corinthians 14:21).

Sometimes the word “**law**” does not refer to the whole Old Testament, but only to the five books of Moses as distinct from the prophets and the psalms, which are other two divisions of the Old Testament. Jesus spoke of “**the law and the prophets**” (Luke 16:16) and “**The Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms**” (Luke 24:44). Jesus’ disciples Philip told his friend Nathanael: “**We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets wrote – Jesus of Nazareth**” (John 1:45). The synagogue service at Antioch in Pisidia included “**the reading of the Law and the Prophets**” (Acts 13:15). The apostle Paul told Governor Felix that he believed “**all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets**” (Acts 24:14). When he was a prisoner in Rome, Paul had a meeting with a number of Jews, “**persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening**” (Acts 28:23).

In some of Paul’s letters the word “**law**” has various meanings, which must be determined by the context. In the following passages it is clear that the word “**law**” does not refer to the Ten Commandments, or to the Old Testament, or to the writings of Moses:

- We read in Romans 3:27: “**Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith.**” The meaning here is “principle” or “rule”. The point is that salvation alone by faith in Jesus rules out any idea of boasting on our part. If salvation were by works, boasting would not be excluded; we would be able to boast of our good works that saved us. But the principle of faith rules out boasting. The fact that we are saved by what Christ has done, rather than by what we have done, makes boasting impossible, except for boasting in Christ, on whom our salvation rests.
- In the seventh chapter of his letter to the Romans Paul uses the term “**law**” in several ways. He says: “**I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good**” (Romans 7:21). Paul is speaking of himself as a Christian who still retains the old Adam (sinful flesh). Since he trusts in Christ and wants to please Him, he wants to do good things. But by experience he has learned the principle or truth that he is unable to do the good that he wants to do because his sinful flesh is still within him and obstructing him.
- A few verses further on, Paul writes: “**I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members**” (Romans 7:23). The “**law**” in Paul’s members is that law or principle of sin within him, that is, his sinful flesh which continues to struggle against the law of his mind, which is the new man in him created by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel of Christ. It is one principle or law fighting against another law or principle, that is, the lusts of the flesh against the new man of the Holy Spirit.
- Paul concludes this discussion with these words: “**With the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin**” (Romans 7:25). “**The law of God**” is the will of God as summarized in the Ten Commandments. The new man of the mind is happy to serve God; as Paul says in Romans 7:22: “**I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.**” But with his flesh Paul continues to serve the law or principle of sin. Which principle gains the victory in this struggle? Paul explains: “**The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death**” (Romans 8:2).

In all of these passages we have to pay close attention to the context and to the point that Paul is trying to make in order to understand the specific sense which the word “**law**” has in that place.

In reading the psalms and the prophets it is important that we do not automatically equate the term “**law**” with the commandments of God. Sometimes the word “**law**” may even refer to the Gospel. For example, we read in Isaiah 2:3: **“Many people shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.”** What the prophet is prophesying here is the New Testament era, the coming of Christ, which was fulfilled when the Gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection for the salvation of the world went out from Jerusalem, beginning at Pentecost, but going out from there to all the Gentile nations. There are several other references to “**law**” in Isaiah that are really speaking of the Gospel of Christ. The same is true of the psalms, particularly Psalm 119, which we looked at earlier.

But when we speak of the doctrine of the law and the Gospel, we are thinking of the law as it is used in contrast to the Gospel, that is, as the Word from God that demands that human beings conform to God’s standard in attitude and conduct and pronounces God’s curse on those who fail to conform. The law is the doctrine or teaching that shows us what is right and God-pleasing and condemns everything that is contrary to God’s will and is therefore sinful. The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans: **“We know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin”** (Romans 3:19-20). God’s law makes demands on us that we cannot satisfy. The law shows us our sin. The law uncovers the important truth that every single human resident of the world is a sinner who cannot stand in God’s judgment as a righteous or innocent person. He or she has not done the deeds the law of God requires.

### **Questions**

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1. Why must we say that the word “**law**” has more than one meaning in Scripture?
2. What does the word “**law**” mean in many of the psalms?
3. Give an example where it is clear that the word “**law**” really means the Gospel.
4. Give an example of where the word “**law**” refers to the Old Testament.
5. Give an example where the word “**law**” refers only to the books of Moses.
6. What does “**law**” mean in Romans 3:27?
7. What struggle is Paul talking about in Romans chapter 7?
8. What does “**law**” mean in Isaiah 42:3-4?
9. What does “**law**” mean in Romans 3:19-20?



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.4.1 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### The Different Kinds of Law: Ceremonial

As far as the Old Testament Israelites were concerned, there was only one law, the law of God, and they promised to obey all of it. Even before God spoke the words of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai, the people said to Moses: **“All that the LORD has spoken we will do”** (Exodus 19:8). The Lord God directly and also through Moses spoke many laws to the people, not only the Ten Commandments, but the many other laws contained in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Israelites were commanded to keep all of these laws, and they promised to keep them. We read in Exodus: **“Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the judgments. And all the people answered with one voice and said, ‘All the words which the LORD has said we will do”** (Exodus 24:3). There was no distinction made between one law or another. They were to do all the words which the Lord God spoke to them. They failed to keep their promises. Almost at once they broke the very first command the Lord spoke to them: **“You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image”** (Exodus 20:3-4), by fashioning a golden calf and calling that image their God.

For us New Testament believers the situation is different. God Himself has made a distinction between the various laws He gave to His people. On the one hand, the Lord has repeated some of His laws and regulations through His apostles and He expects us even now to uphold these laws and strive to keep them. Jesus Himself repeated the laws that we call the first and second tables of the law: the command to love God and the command to love our neighbor. The apostles repeated the Ten Commandments as a standard for Christian behavior also for us. But on the other hand, the Lord specifically declared some of the commandments as obsolete and no longer applicable to us. From our perspective we label these laws that no longer apply to us ceremonial laws and civil laws. These laws were given only to the Israelites in the days before the coming of the Messiah.

For example, almost all the laws God gave to the people that are recorded in the book of Leviticus are ceremonial laws that have to do with the prescribed worship that the Lord commanded. This involved the tabernacle worship (and, later, the temple worship) with its sacred furniture, its sacrifices, and its priestly duties. All of this was spelled out for the people in detail. This is what we read in the first verses of Leviticus: **“When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of the livestock – of the herd and of the flock. If his offering is a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish; he shall offer it of his own free will at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the LORD”** (Leviticus 1:2-3). Notice that the time and the place and the type of offering are all regulated by God. This is what we mean by the ceremonial law. There are pages and pages of such laws in Leviticus and the other books of Moses. Obedience to these laws was enforced, and there were consequences for those who disobeyed.

Among these ceremonial laws were laws having to do with food and drink. There were some animals that God declared unclean, and the Israelites were forbidden to eat them (Leviticus 11). Other laws had to do with special days and festivals. For example, the seventh day was the Sabbath, and the Israelites were forbidden to do ordinary work on those days. This commandment was strictly enforced. We read in the book of Numbers: **“While the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. ... Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp”** (Numbers 15:32-35).

The apostle Paul assures us that these ceremonial laws do not apply to us New Testament believers in Christ. There were some teachers in Colosse who were insisting that these ceremonial rules of the past must still be obeyed. But Paul wrote to them: **“Let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ”** (Colossians 2:16-17). Paul also wrote to them: **“If you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations – ‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,’ which all concern things which perish with the using – 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).

Notice that Paul calls these rules about food and drink, and even the Sabbath rule, a shadow of things to come. If we see the shadow of a person approaching us, we look at the shadow to determine what he is like only when some obstruction prevents us from seeing the person himself. But as soon as we see the person himself, we pay no attention to the shadow. As long as the Messiah had not yet come, the Israelites paid attention to the various ceremonies, sacrifices, and rules that were pictures or symbols of Him and His work. But when the Messiah Himself came and fulfilled all these pictures and symbols, there is no longer any need to pay attention to His shadow.

Therefore no one should judge us, that is, no one should condemn us for what we eat or drink, or whether we celebrate the Old Testament festivals like the new moon or the Sabbath. Notice that even one of the Ten Commandments is no longer in effect in the way that God gave it to the Israelites. The Israelites were to remember the seventh day, the Sabbath, as a day of rest. They were not to work on that day, and if they disobeyed, they were punished. But Paul says that now that the Messiah has come, no one should condemn us for what we do on Saturday. The Sabbath law no longer applies to us, because the substance of Christ has replaced the shadow of the Sabbath.

In a similar way Paul wrote to the Christians of Galatia: **“You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain”** (Galatians 4:10-11). The apostle Paul was teaching them the true way of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, but some of them were insisting that they still had to keep all the Old Testament regulations in order to be saved. Paul’s work among them would be in vain if they bound themselves to obedience to these Old Testament laws as being necessary for salvation. To the Romans Paul wrote: **“The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”** (Romans 14:17).

We can understand why the Jewish people, whose entire lives had been lived under Old Testament regulations, had a difficult time adjusting to the new circumstances of the New Testament era that began with the coming of their Messiah and the completion of His work. The apostle Peter himself, a lifelong Jew accustomed to the laws of the Old Testament regarding food and drink, had difficulty with this change. The Lord Himself had to do something extraordinary to convince Peter to adjust his thinking. This is what we read in the tenth chapter of the book of Acts: **“Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.’ And a voice spoke to him again the second time, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common.’ This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again”** (Acts 10:9-16). God was telling Peter that the Old Testament food laws were now obsolete.

The purpose of laws such as the law of food and drink was to keep the Jewish people separate from the Gentiles (non-Jews) until the coming of the Messiah. God had warned them over and over again in words like these: **“You shall not make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause anyone to swear by them; you shall not serve them nor bow down to them, but you shall hold fast to the LORD your God”** (Joshua 23:7-8). The Gentiles ate unclean food; the Jews, therefore, could not eat with

them. But now that the Messiah had come, the Lord no longer wanted the Jews and Gentiles to be separate from each other.

At that very time when Peter had this housetop vision, he was being visited by three messengers from a Gentile soldier named Cornelius, asking Peter to go to this Gentile man's home and bring him the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As an Israelite under the Old Testament law, Peter would have declined the invitation. But we read in Acts: "**The Spirit said to him (Peter), 'Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them'**" (Acts 10:19-20). When Peter went to the home of the Gentile Cornelius, he told the assembled crowd: "**You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for**" (Acts 10:28-29).

This is a very important incident; it shows us the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. By this vision God Himself declared that the old barriers were gone, the old food laws were no longer in effect, and the ceremonies God gave to the Israelites were obsolete. Peter proclaimed the Gospel of Christ in the home of Cornelius, and the Holy Spirit manifested himself in a visible way just as on the day of Pentecost. Peter then said: "**Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?**" (Acts 10:47).

Nevertheless, there were some influential members of the congregation at Jerusalem who objected to this abolition of Old Testament regulations. A number of them went from Jerusalem to other congregations and complained about the preaching of the Gospel to Gentiles and accepting them as members without teaching them to comply with Old Testament laws. They showed up in Antioch of Syria and in the Galatian congregations with this firm opinion: "**Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved**" (Acts 15:1). Paul and Barnabas disagreed with these men, and it was decided to hold a meeting in Jerusalem with the apostles and elders to resolve this disagreement. At that meeting these same members from Jerusalem repeated their claim: "**It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses**" (Acts 15:5). They wanted all the ceremonial laws to remain as the law of God that must be obeyed, and they went even further by saying that salvation depended on the keeping of these laws.

Peter responded by showing them that God Himself had brought an end to these ceremonial laws, including circumcision. He said to them: "**Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they**" (Acts 15:7-11). This settled the matter.

Even though the Old Testament believers in Christ lived under the Old Testament ceremonial laws, they were certainly unable to keep them, and they certainly were not saved by keeping them. As Peter said, their Jewish fathers were unable to bear the yoke of the Old Testament regulations. Their failure to follow the ceremonial laws as well as the other laws they promised to keep showed that they were condemned sinners. The only way of salvation the Old Testament Israelites knew was faith in the promised Savior, just as our only way of salvation is faith in the Savior that came.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul had to deal with the false teachers who claimed that circumcision and the keeping of other regulations were necessary for salvation. In reply Paul said: "**Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace**" (Galatians 5:1-4).

Paul's point is that there are two possible ways of salvation. One way works, and the other does not. The first way is keeping the law. Those who attempt that way must keep the whole law perfectly in every point in order to be saved, and no one is able to do that. The other way is the way of grace, the way of Christ, the way of faith in Christ. This is the only way of salvation that actually saves anyone.

The purpose of the sacrifices and the priesthood of the Old Testament is fully explained in the letter to the Hebrews. Here again we read that the ceremonies and sacrifices "**serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle**" (Hebrews 8:5). Here also we read that the first covenant was replaced with a new covenant. "**If that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second**" (Hebrews 8:7). "**In that He says, 'A new covenant,' He has made the first obsolete**" (Hebrews 8:13). "**He takes away the first that He may establish the second**" (Hebrews 10:9).

### **Questions**

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1. Which laws were the Israelites commanded to obey?
2. Which laws did they promise to obey?
3. How soon did they break their promise to obey God's laws?
4. What is meant by a ceremonial law?
5. Why do we New Testament Christians no longer have to obey the ceremonial laws?
6. How do we know we no longer have to keep the Sabbath law?
7. How did God show Peter he was no longer bound by the ceremonial laws?
8. What happened when Peter preached Christ in a Gentile home?
9. Why did Paul and Barnabas disagree with certain members from Jerusalem?
10. How did Peter settle the dispute between Paul and Barnabas and these members?
11. What does the Bible mean when it calls the ceremonial laws a shadow?
12. What kind of obedience must we have to get to heaven by the law?
13. What is the only true way of salvation?
14. What does the letter to the Hebrews say about the old covenant?



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.4.2 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### The Different Kinds of Law: Civil

Since the nation of Israel was a theocracy, that is, a nation that had the Lord God Himself as its Ruler and Lawgiver, and since the nation had both believers and unbelievers as its citizens, and the believers still had a sinful flesh, it was necessary for God to enact and enforce civil laws to curb the external sins of the people and to establish a suitable punishment for the various offenses. Many of the laws that are found in the books of Moses are not moral laws that are intended for all people nor ceremonial laws having to do with worship, but civil laws such as any government must have to control its citizens.

Exodus chapters 21-23, for example, lists many such civil laws – laws governing slaves or servants, laws regarding marriage and betrothal, laws regarding murder (intentional and unintentional), laws regarding kidnapping, laws regarding the behavior of animals, laws regarding restitution for theft, etc. These laws were intended only for the Israelites and have no binding force for us, although they may give us good examples of how best to handle similar situations in our country. These civil laws can be summed up in the axiom: **“Life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot”** (Deuteronomy 19:21). In other words, the punishment shall fit the crime.

Jesus Himself distinguished between moral law and civil law when some Pharisees came to Him with a question concerning divorce. They asked: **“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?”** (Matthew 19:3). In His reply Jesus referred to God’s original creation, as it is recorded in Genesis 1 and 2, and concluded: **“What God has joined together, let not man separate”** (Matthew 19:6). The Pharisees objected, saying that Moses allowed divorce. They were referring to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, where we read: **“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, and sends her out of his house.”** Jesus responded: **“Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so”** (Matthew 19:8).

This explains why civil law may not always be in perfect agreement with moral law. Because of the sinfulness of mankind, it is sometimes necessary for a government to allow certain things like divorce to prevent a worse crime such as sexual abuse or even murder. If all human beings were perfect as at the beginning, there would be no cause for divorce at all. God’s will is that every marriage be a lifelong union between one man and one woman, as He established at the beginning.

In this New Testament era we are no longer living under a theocratic form of civil government. The laws God gave to Israel (and to Israel only), do not apply to us today. As Christians we are under the laws of whatever civil government God has placed over us. The apostle Peter wrote: **“Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men”** (1 Peter 2:13-15). It is not for us to determine which laws we will obey and which laws we will disobey because they seem foolish or useless to us. Since God gives governments their authority, and God commands us to submit to them, disobedience to the laws of the land is disobedience to God, unless these governments command us to do what God forbids or forbid us to do what God commands. In such cases we must say with Peter: **“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge”** (Acts 4:19). **“We ought to obey God rather than men”** (Acts 5:29).

The apostle Paul was in perfect agreement with Peter, writing to the Romans: “**Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. ... He is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil**” (Romans 13:1-4).

The authority that currently has authority is the authority that we are to obey. If we are living in Nepal, we need to obey the Nepalese authorities. If we are living in Nigeria, we need to obey the Nigerian authorities. When there is civil war in a land, we need to determine which authority has real authority in the place where we live and obey that authority. This may sometimes be difficult to determine. In any case, we must put God’s moral law above all human civil law and obey God rather than any human authority when there is a conflict between what God commands and what the civil government commands.

### **Questions**

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1. Why did God have to establish civil laws for the nation of Israel?
2. Name several examples of such civil laws that God made for Israel.
3. Why did Moses allow divorce, according to the words of Jesus?
4. How many governmental laws should we obey?
5. When should we disobey the laws of the land?
6. What does it mean when Paul says the government bears the sword?
7. What is God’s will in time of civil war?
8. Why did Peter and the other apostles disobey the authorities in Acts?



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.4.3 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### The Different Kinds of Law: Moral

As indicated in lesson 18.4.1, the moral law is the law that is still valid for us New Testament Christians as a standard of behavior. The moral law is the law that God wrote in man's hearts from the beginning of creation. This moral law applies to all human beings, not just to the Israelites.

In the Old Testament there were no distinctions between moral law and other kinds of law. For the Israelites the entire law was their standard, and they were accountable to God for their keeping of the entire law. But that is not the case for us today. In order to determine what is moral law, and what is not moral law, we need to pay careful attention to all the words of Jesus and His apostles in the New Testament. If a law is repeated in the New Testament as a standard for us Christians today, then we know that that law is a moral law, and not a ceremonial or civil law only.

Jesus Himself summarized the moral law of God in response to a question from a lawyer who asked Him: “**Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?**” Jesus responded: “**You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:36-40).**

Another lawyer asked Jesus: “**Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?**” Jesus responded by asking him: “**What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?**” The lawyer responded by saying the same thing Jesus said in Matthew 22:36-40 quoted above: “**You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself.’**” Jesus then said to him: “**You have answered rightly**” (Luke 10:25-28).

Jesus explained love for a neighbor by stating what has been called the Golden Rule: “**Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets**” (Matthew 7:12).

The apostle Paul also taught that the moral law of God applies to all people can be summarized by one word: love. He wrote to Timothy: “**The purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith**” (1 Timothy 1:5). Similarly Paul wrote to the Galatians: “**All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’**” (Galatians 5:14).

In his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul explained this at greater length, writing: “**Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law**” (Romans 13:8-10).

The threats contained in the moral law also apply to us today, and to all people. We read in Paul's letter to the Galatians: “**Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God**” (Galatians 5:19-21).

We find a similar statement in Paul's letter to the Ephesians: "**No fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience**" (Ephesians 5:5-6).

Paul gave the same warning to the Corinthians: "**Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God**" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

In general, the Ten Commandments serve as a summary of the moral law of God. Therefore, in the following lessons we shall examine each commandment and learn how each commandment is repeated and explained in the New Testament. The Ten Commandments themselves can be summarized as Jesus summarized them in the so-called two tables or tablets of the law: love for God and love for neighbor. The first three of the Ten Commandments belong to the First Table. The remaining seven commandments belong to the Second Table. Even the two tables can be summarized with one word: love. "**Love is the fulfillment of the law**" (Romans 13:10).

## Questions

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1. What is the difference between the moral law and the other kinds of laws that God gave to the Israelites?
2. How can we determine which laws are part of God's moral law?
3. How did Jesus summarize the moral law of God?
4. What is the Golden Rule?
5. How do we know that the threats of the law still apply to us?
6. What is our only escape from these threats of the law?
7. Why can we not be saved by keeping the moral law of God?



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.4.3.1 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### The Moral Law: The First Commandment

How do we know that God gave the Israelites ten commandments, and how do we know which commandment is the First Commandment, and which is the Second, and so forth? We know that there were ten commandments, because Moses said to the Israelites before they crossed the Jordan River to enter the land of Canaan: **“He (God) declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone”** (Deuteronomy 4:13). We know that the first two tablets were broken by Moses when he came down from Mt. Sinai and found the people worshiping the golden calf. But Moses went up on the mountain again with two other tablets, and he said to the people: **“He (God) wrote on the tablets according to the first writing, the Ten Commandments, which the LORD had spoken to you in the mountain from the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly; and the LORD gave them to me. Then I turned and came down from the mountain, and put the tablets in the ark which I had made; and there they are, just as the LORD commanded me”** (Deuteronomy 10:4-5).

But even though we know there were ten commandments (literally “words”), we do not know for sure which one is the First Commandment, and which is the Second Commandment, and so forth. The fact is that different groups have divided them in different ways. When Martin Luther wrote his *Small Catechism*, he used the numbering that was common in the Roman Catholic Church. Other reformers changed the numbering, so that what we teach as the First Commandment was divided by them into the First and Second Commandments. Thus, the numbering of the commandments differs among the various church groups today. The Tenth Commandment of others was divided by Martin Luther into two commandments, as we shall see. It is possible that Luther’s numbering is not the best way of dividing the commandments, but it is the traditional way that has been used among the Lutherans, and it would be confusing at this point to make any changes. The content remains the same, no matter what numbering is followed.

In Luther’s catechism, the First Commandment includes the following underlined words from Exodus and Deuteronomy:

- **“God spoke all these words, saying: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them”** (Exodus 20:1-5).
- **“He said: ‘I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them”** (Deuteronomy 5:5-9).

Most Protestant churches call the commandment about images the Second Commandment, whereas Lutherans consider the commandment about images as an explanation of the First Commandment.

The Lutheran *Book of Concord* (Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 351) gives us this English translation of the First Commandment and Luther’s explanation in his *Small Catechism*:

## The First Commandment

You are to have no other gods.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.

The God who gave us this commandment identified Himself to the Israelites as the LORD (JAHVEH or JEHOVAH) who brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thus this God is not a generic god, but a specific God with a specific name. He is the God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who called Abraham to be the father of a new nation, the God who promised to Adam and Eve the coming of a Savior, later called the Messiah or the Christ, and repeated that same promise to Abraham and his descendants through the prophets. In other words, this God is the God who sent His Son Jesus into our world to be our Savior from sin, death, and hell, and who accomplished our salvation through this Son. This God is the God who sent the Holy Spirit into the world to make known the good news of Jesus' birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection. Thus, the God who spoke this First Commandment is the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible, and particularly in the Person of God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We are to have no other gods except this one God who spoke this commandment to His people.

The worship of other gods is called idolatry, and other gods are called idols. We know that this First Commandment is part of God's moral law for us Christians today, because this commandment is clearly repeated in the New Testament. The apostle John wrote: "**Little children, keep yourselves from idols**" (1 John 5:21). The apostle Paul wrote: "**My beloved, flee from idolatry**" (1 Corinthians 10:14). God's threats indicate that He wants us to take this commandment seriously. "**Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers ... will inherit the kingdom of God**" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). The apostle Paul includes "**idolatry**" as one of "**the works of the flesh**" and then warns: "**Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God**" (Galatians 5:19-21). "**This you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them**" (Ephesians 5:5-7).

Idolatry includes the open worship of anyone or anything other than the Triune God. There are people all over the world who openly worship the sun, the moon, or the stars, and other creations of God instead of worshiping God, the Creator of all things. Some people worship their ancestors. Some worship Satan (the devil) or evil spirits (demons). Others worship persons they consider especially holy, such as believers who have been named as saints, such as Saint Mary, Saint Paul, Saint Peter, Saint Thomas, and so forth. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, promotes prayer to Mary. One of the prayers common among them has this wording: "Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of mercy; hail, our life, our sweetness, our hope. To thee do we cry ... Turn then, most gracious advocate, Thine eyes of mercy toward us." Mao-Tse-Tung, former leader of China, once said: "Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people."

Christianity is the only religion in the world where worship is directed only to the one true Triune God. All other religions worship other gods, whether it is Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, or Islam. Even many who call themselves Christians do not really worship the one true God who has revealed Himself in the Bible, but they worship a god of their own making, a god that they have themselves invented in their own minds.

Idolatry also includes the worship of those who say they are worshiping god or God, but yet are not willing to acknowledge Jesus as God or the Holy Spirit as God. Some Muslims and some Christians think that they are all worshiping the same God. But Muslims do not regard Jesus as the Son of God or as a Person of the Triune God. So their Allah is an idol. The adherents of Judaism claim the Old Testament as their Bible, as do we Christians. Nevertheless, the God of the Jews is an idol, because

Jews do not accept or worship Jesus as the true Son of God, nor do they realize that the true God who chose the Israelites as His people is the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Such religious groups as Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, the practitioners of Christian Science, and the Unitarians no doubt consider themselves to be Christians because they use the Bible, but they are not Christians but idolaters, because they do not believe that Jesus is the true Son of God, true God together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. There are also many religious organizations or semi-religious organizations that refer to God in their services or literature but consider worship in Christ as optional. Some of these organizations are called lodges, such as the Masonic Lodge (the Free Masons) and other similar groups. These groups talk freely about God and consider themselves to be worshiping the same God as true Christians, but their god is really an idol because they do not confess Jesus to be true God. The same thing is true of much patriotic religion in the United States that talks about God but will not define that God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so as not to offend non-Christians.

Listen to what Jesus had to say about such worship. After putting Himself on the same level as the Father, **"the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God"** (John 5:18). Did Jesus respond by telling the Jews that they had misunderstood Him? No, He did not. Rather, Jesus confirmed that they understood Him rightly, saying: **"As the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will. For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him"** (John 5:21-23). He was definitely making Himself equal with God.

Some of the Jews claimed to be worshiping the true God. But Jesus said to them: **"If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. ... You are of your father the devil. ... He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God"** (John 8:42-47).

We must therefore be on guard against joining or supporting any religious group that claims to worship God, but will not confess Jesus as true God with the Father and the Holy Spirit. For example, in the United States there are youth groups known as the Girl Scouts and the Boy Scouts. Members of both of these groups promise to serve God or do their duty to God, but this God is not defined as the Triune God, and belief in Jesus as God is considered optional. If the so-called God of the organization is vague and undefined, members of the organization are guilty of sponsoring idolatry, whether they realize it or not. We should not **"share in other people's sins"** by membership in such groups (1 Timothy 5:22).

Idolatry also includes the inward or secret fear, love, or trust in any person or thing more than the true God. We should have no other gods. That is, we should love God above all things. As Jesus said: **"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind"** (Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30, see also Luke 10:27). God must come first in all things. Jesus said: **"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me"** (Matthew 10:37). It is not wrong, but very right, to love our parents and our children. But if there is a conflict between our parents and God, then God should come first. If there is a conflict between our children and God, then God must come first.

One of the most common idols on earth is money. Those who don't have money want it and think that money will make them happy. Those who have money want more of it, and no matter how much they have, it does not make them happy. It is not sinful to have much money. But Jesus said: **"You cannot serve God and mammon (money)"** (Matthew 6:24). David said: **"If riches increase, do not set your heart on them"** (Psalm 62:10). Not only are we in danger of loving money more than God; we are also tempted to trust in money and the things money can buy more than in God.

Another common idol is self. That is, we may think we are wiser than God. We may put our trust in our own thinking power more than in God. We may want to set aside what God has to say about something because we prefer our own ideas to His. But God's Word is clear: **"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding"** (Proverbs 3:5).

This idol of self gets in the way of our Christian living. Instead of living our lives according to the will of God, we fashion our lives according to what gives us pleasure, even if it is a behavior that God forbids. One very prevalent philosophy of our time is hedonism, which can be summed up in the slogan: "If it feels good, do it." But many times what feels good is not what God has in mind for us. What God wants us to do may not always feel good, but it is good.

Any thing or any person can become an idol, even our own husband or wife. It is easy for us to make family more important than God and to make our work more important God. Potential idols include such items as pleasure, power, prestige, or personal pride. Sometimes we are more concerned to gain the approval of others rather than the approval of God, thus fearing men more than God.

The Old Testament gives us several examples of believers in Christ who kept the First Commandment as a fruit of their faith in the coming Messiah of Israel. For a long time Abraham and Sarah had waited for a child. Finally God gave them a son whose name was Isaac. After son Isaac had grown into a young man, God ordered Abraham to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice to the Lord. There must have been an inner conflict in Abraham. Should he obey God by killing his own son? But he did not waste any time in obeying God's order. He did as God had commanded, and while the knife was already in his hand to kill his son, God stopped Abraham and spared Isaac.

When he was still a very young man, David, in his zeal for the Lord, put God's promise first and dared to fight against the Philistine giant Goliath. David trusted in God's promise to be with His people when they went out to battle against God's enemies. With his sling he slung a stone right into Goliath's forehead, and then he used Goliath's own sword to cut off the giant's head.

Many years later there were three young Israelites who were ordered to worship a golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. These three men did not want to worship this idol, even though they knew that their disobedience might cost them their lives. But they were more afraid of displeasing God than displeasing the king. They refused to worship the golden image, and as a result they were thrown into a fiery furnace. They trusted that God could deliver them if He chose to do so. They put God's command above the king's command, and God did indeed miraculously preserve their lives even though they were thrown into a furnace so hot that those who threw them into the furnace perished.

This First Commandment condemns all of us, however, for we have all failed at one time or another to put God above everything else in our lives. Even though we may not have openly worshiped an idol or some image made of wood or stone, we have all had thoughts and feelings where other things and other persons claimed more of our attention and devotion than God. We have all been guilty of idolatry. Only Jesus Himself put God above everything else in His thoughts, words, and actions. The Father Himself could find no fault in His Son, saying of Him both at His baptism and at His transfiguration: "**This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased**" (Matthew 3:17; Matthew 17:5).

Since we have transgressed the First Commandment, we deserve temporal and eternal punishment. Our only hope to escape from this punishment is Jesus Christ, who obeyed the First Commandment in our place and was punished in our place for our disobedience. We need to cling to Jesus in faith and also ask Him to give us the Holy Spirit to work through the Gospel in our hearts so that we may fear, love, and trust in God above all things. All our lives we will have to struggle against idolatry, but Christ has won forgiveness for us which the Holy Spirit extends to us in the means of grace: the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

## Questions

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1. How do we know that God gave His people ten commandments?
2. Why is there confusion as to which commandment is the First Commandment?
3. Why did Martin Luther and the Lutherans divide the commandments as they did?
4. What is the wording of the First Commandment in the Small Catechism?
5. Why can we be sure the First Commandment is part of God's moral law?
6. What is the difference between open idolatry and secret idolatry?
7. What makes both Muslims and Jews idolaters in their worship?
8. Prove that your answer to question 7 is correct by quoting a statement from Jesus.
9. What are the most common idols on earth?
10. What are the most common idols in your locale?
11. Why can we not be saved by keeping the First Commandment?
12. What is the only way by which we can be saved?



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

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.4.3.2 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### The Moral Law: The Second Commandment

This is the complete wording of the Second Commandment as it is recorded in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy:

- **You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain** (Exodus 20:7).
- **You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain** (Deuteronomy 5:11).

The name of the LORD (JAHVEH or JEHOVAH) includes more than this one specific name or any of the many other names God gives Himself in the Bible, such as God, Redeemer, Savior, Jesus, Christ, Holy Spirit, Father, Immanuel, Creator, and so forth. The name of God includes everything He has revealed about Himself in the entire Bible. In Jesus' prayer to His Father He used "name" and "words" interchangeably. First, He says to His Father: **I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me** (John 17:6). A bit later He says: **I have given to them the words which You have given Me** (John 17:8). God's name is in His words. As we are to honor the name of our God, we are also to honor and cherish all the words that our God has given us. We are to use His name and His words for good purposes, but not for an evil purpose. That would be taking God's name in vain.

The Lutheran *Book of Concord* (Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 352) gives us this English translation of the Second Commandment and Luther's explanation in his *Small Catechism*:

#### The Second Commandment

You are not to misuse the name of your God.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not curse, swear, practice magic, lie, or deceive using God's name, but instead use that very name in every need to call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God.

We know that this Second Commandment is part of God's moral law and is still God's will for us today, because it is repeated in the New Testament. James, the brother of our Lord Jesus, wrote: **Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?** (James 2:6-7). James also wrote: **No man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be** (James 3:8-10). Here is another word from James: **Above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No,' lest you fall into judgment** (James 5:12).

James also teaches us the right way to use the name of God: **Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the**

**prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much”** (James 5:13-16).

The apostle Paul also warned against misuse of the name of God. He told the Galatians: “**Those who practice such things (including “sorcery” and “heresies”) will not inherit the kingdom of God**” (Galatians 5:20-21). He wrote to the Ephesians: “**Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers**” (Ephesians 4:29).

Notice that Luther first speaks of the misuse of God’s name by cursing, swearing, sorcery, and lying and deceiving by God’s name. Then he refers to the right use of God’s name: calling on His name in time of trouble, praying to Him, praising Him, and giving Him thanks.

Cursing by God’s name includes cursing God Himself and cursing others in God’s name, that is, calling on God to harm them in some way, as when one person says to another person: “God damn you”, or: “Go to hell”. The Pharaoh of Egypt cursed God when he replied to the request Moses made in God’s name to let His Israelites slaves go away to worship their God: “**Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice?**” (Exodus 5:2). Cursing God in this way is called blasphemy.

God’s name is misused often in human conversation when the name of God is called on to send evil on someone. But we ought to be using our tongues to bless other people, that is, calling on God to do good to others, and not to curse them (James 3:8-10). It is so easy for us to use our tongues to hurt other people rather than to edify them or build them up in their faith. But it is not a misuse of God’s name when we repeat God’s curses on unbelievers and false teachers when it is appropriate to do so, as Paul himself did: “**If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed**” (1 Corinthians 16:22). “**Even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed**” (Galatians 1:8).

God’s name is misused by swearing an oath regarding a lie or a false promise or swearing an oath in uncertain matters, or needless swearing an oath. When one swears by God’s name in court, one should speak only the truth. If one lies under oath, that is called perjury and is contrary to God’s will. Swearing means asking God to witness our truth and punish our lie. There are times when it is proper to swear and take a solemn oath in God’s name to tell the truth. Jesus swore before the Jewish court that He was the Messiah and the Son of God. When “**the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, ‘Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’ Jesus said, ‘I am’**” (Mark 14:61-62). Matthew informs us that on this occasion the high priest said to Jesus: “**I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!**” (Matthew 26:63). Since Jesus Himself swore to tell the truth and Paul and others have also sworn on solemn occasions, we cannot say that all swearing is sinful. But when Peter “**began to curse and swear**” that he did not even know who Jesus was, he was shamefully denying his Lord (Matthew 26:74).

It surely should not be necessary for Christians to swear in God’s name in ordinary conversation. As James said, we should have such a reputation for truth and honesty that when we say “Yes” or “No”, we do not have to add God’s name so that people will believe what we say. Jesus warned us against needless swearing when He said: “**Let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one**” (Matthew 5:37).

An awful example of swearing in uncertain matters is provided by King Herod when he swore to give the daughter of Herodias whatever she wanted, up to the half of his kingdom. He did not know what she was going to ask for. When she asked for the head of John the Baptist, Herod regretted his oath. But he felt he had to keep it, and thus added another murder to his list of crimes. The account is recorded in Mark 6:21-28.

In the United States it is common for people to consider any kind of crude, vulgar, or obscene language to be cursing or swearing, also called “cussing”. But cursing and swearing in the context of the Second

Commandment refer to the use and misuse of the name of God. It is important that when we use the name of God or the name of Jesus, we ask ourselves whether we are using that name for prayer, praise, or giving thanks, or if we are using it needlessly or thoughtlessly, or even to harm someone else. God Himself can hear every word we say, and He knows why we are saying what we say.

Crude language or obscenities may not be the best language to use, but it is not as bad as misusing God's holy name. In America, television and movies frequently use the name of God in vain, even though certain words that are considered obscene are not used so frequently. But in all our words we should aim to help people and not hurt them. **"Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one"** (Colossians 4:6). Just like bits in horses' mouths and rudders in ships, **"even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity"** (James 3:5-6).

God's name or Word is also misused when it is used in connection with sorcery or magic, or in other superstitious ways that have no basis in God's Word. God's Word condemns such practices as astrology, fortune telling, contacting the dead, and the use of magic charms. The Christians in Ephesus burned their books of black magic after they learned the real power and worth of Jesus' name. See Acts 19:13-19.

It is dangerous for us to experiment with the occult – the secret arts of witches, wizards or evil spirits. Our faith should be placed in the true God, who does His marvelous work through the means He has chosen, namely, His Word and His sacraments. We should not want to give up our faith in a God we can trust for false beliefs encouraged by the devil and his angels (i.e., demons or evil spirits). The apostle Paul has warned us that **"the coming of the lawless one (Antichrist) is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders"** (2 Thessalonians 2:9).

The worst misuse of God's name and Word occurs when teachers and preachers use God's name and claim to be speaking for God and then teach things that are contrary or beyond God's Word. What the apostle John once wrote has certainly been proved true in our time: **"Many false prophets have gone out into the world"** (1 John 4:1). This has been true in every age and will continue to be true until the last day. Some of these false teachers have simply created their own religion and yet claim to be messengers or prophets of God. Buddhism, Islam, Mormonism, Christian Science, Scientology, Seventh Day Adventism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and countless other religions have been invented by those claiming to be true prophets of God – men or women like Gautama, Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, and Ellen White. **"Indeed they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart, who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams which everyone tells his neighbor. ... Behold, I am against the prophets, says the LORD, who use their tongues, and say: 'He says'"** (Jeremiah 23:26-27, 31). Jesus said: **"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves"** (Matthew 7:15).

Sometimes even true Christians are misled by Satan to write or say things that are contrary to God's Word. For example, when Jesus told His disciples that He had to go to Jerusalem to **"suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed"**, His own disciple Peter objected to what Jesus said about God's plan of salvation. Jesus then **"turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men'"** (Matthew 16:21-23). Yet only a short time earlier Peter had confessed: **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"** and Jesus had responded: **"Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven"** (Matthew 16:16-17). False teaching of all kinds is so prevalent in the world that the apostle Paul warned the Christians in Rome: **"Note those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them"** (Romans 16:17).

God's name and Word is misused also by hypocrites who act as though they are devoted to God but in reality, they are deceivers. They use God's name and God's Word as a cover for their sinful behavior. For example, they go to church on Sunday morning but during the week they live the lives of

unbelievers. Jesus was not deceived by hypocrites, for He could look into their hearts and know their attitudes. Over and over again at the close of His ministry He charged the Pharisees and scribes with hypocrisy, saying to them: **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are the whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness”** (Matthew 23:27). Read all of Matthew 23 to learn what Jesus thinks of hypocrisy.

Some of the Jewish people were so afraid of misusing the name of God that they did not use the sacred name JAHVEH or JEHOVAH at all, choosing to substitute another word for it. But God certainly does want us to use His name rightly. As Luther wrote in his *Small Catechism*, we should call upon God’s name in trouble, we should pray to Him, we should praise His name and give thanks to Him, as becomes clear, for example, from the book of Psalms. Almost every psalm includes a proper use of the name of God. God says to us: **“Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me”** (Psalm 50:15). In psalm after psalm we find David or one of the other psalmists calling on God in their troubles.

But it is not only in trouble that we should talk to God in prayer. The apostle Paul encouraged us to pray at all times: **“Pray without ceasing”** (1 Thessalonians 5:17); the lines of communication between God and ourselves should always be open. Jesus said: **“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you”** (Matthew 7:7). Both Old Testament and New Testament provide many examples of the right use of God’s name in prayer.

We are urged to use God’s name in words of praise throughout Scripture, especially in the psalms. David wrote: **“Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits”** (Psalm 103:1-2). Praising God means telling God and the whole world how great and wonderful He is. Praising God means sharing the good news of our salvation that He has accomplished with all the world. The book of Psalms concludes with a string of psalms that begin with the words: **“Praise the LORD!”** (Psalms 146-150). Hallelujah!

The psalms also call on us to give thanks to God. We read in Psalm 118: **“Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! for His mercy endures forever”** (Psalm 118:1).

The Second Commandment condemns us, just like the First Commandment. We have been guilty and continue to be guilty of taking the name of the Lord in vain. But we sin not only by misusing the name and Word of God. We sin many sins of omission by not taking the opportunity to call on the name of God in our troubles, by not praying to Him regularly and often on every occasion, and especially by not praising His name and giving thanks to Him for all the blessings He has showered on us. Our only hope for salvation is Jesus Christ, who never misused the name of God, nor did He ever fail to call on Him in trouble, to pray, to praise, and to give thanks. Every time He opened His mouth, He was praising the Lord. Even on the cross, as He was forsaken by God because He was being punished for the sin of the world, He still called God His God and cried out to Him in His misery. It is only by faith in Jesus that we receive the forgiveness of sins and His perfect righteousness.

## Questions

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1. What is meant by the name of God?
2. What are five ways in which we misuse the name of God?
3. What are four ways in which we use the name of God rightly?
4. How do we know that the Second Commandment is part of God's moral law?
5. What is meant by cursing?
6. What kind of cursing is permissible for Christians?
7. What kind of swearing is permissible for Christians?
8. Give some examples of when swearing is misusing the name of God.
9. What is meant by sorcery?
10. How did the prophet Jeremiah describe false teachers?
11. Why did Jesus call the Pharisees and scribes hypocrites?
12. What is the difference between prayer and praise?
13. Which misuse of God's name is most common in your locale?
14. Why can we not be saved by keeping the Second Commandment?
15. Who is the only one who has kept the Second Commandment?



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

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.4.3.3 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### The Moral Law: The Third Commandment

The Third Commandment means something different for us from what it meant for the Israelites. In its literal sense the Third Commandment does not apply to us New Testament Christians.

But let us first look at the exact wording by which God spoke the Third Commandment from Mt. Sinai: **“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it”** (Exodus 20:8-11).

When Moses repeated this Third Commandment as the Israelites were about to cross over the Jordan River into Canaan, he did not reiterate the basis for the seventh day of rest in God's original six-day creation and seventh day rest. But this is what he said: **“Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day”** (Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

God gave other rules for keeping the Sabbath through Moses to the people, and the penalty for disobedience was harsh. **“Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death”** (Exodus 31:15). This commandment required God's Old Testament people to rest and refrain from working on Saturday (that is, from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset). Obedience to this commandment was strictly enforced by demanding the death penalty for those who transgressed.

In the period between the last Old Testament prophet Malachi and the coming of Jesus, the Jewish teachers added their interpretations and definitions of work to God's original commandment. As our Redeemer, who was **“born under the law”** (Galatians 4:4), Jesus obeyed God's Third Commandment. But His enemies accused Him breaking the Sabbath because He refused to follow the traditional interpretations that the Jewish leaders had added to God's law. When the Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of working on the Sabbath because they were plucking the heads of grain as they were walking through grainfields, Jesus explained: **“The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath”** (Mark 2:27)

On another occasion His enemies were present for a synagogue service when a man with a withered hand was also there. Jesus asked this man to step forward and then He asked those who were attending the service: **“Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?”** (Mark 3:4). When they refused to answer His question, Jesus was grieved and angry because of their hardness of heart. Jesus then healed the man, even though it was the Sabbath day, and He repeated that action many times during His ministry.

The purpose of the Sabbath law was to give God's people rest from their physical labor, so that they could praise their God by hearing His Word, by praying to Him, and by meditating on the great things He had done for them. The bodies of men and animals need rest. But above all believers in God's promises need an opportunity to hear the Word of God and to thank Him for His blessings. Their Sabbath was to be "**holy to the LORD**" (Exodus 31:15).

The word "sabbath" means "rest". God rested on the seventh day of the world. That is, He rested from the work of creation. He has never rested from His work of preservation, for Jesus said to the Jews who accused Him of working on the Sabbath: "**My Father has been working until now, and I have been working**" (John 5:17). The Saturday rest pointed backwards to God's rest on the seventh day, but it also pointed ahead to a perfect spiritual rest in the future.

Israelites experienced one such rest when they enjoyed rest in the promised land of Canaan after their many years of wandering in the wilderness. But there were some who did not enjoy that rest because of their unbelief. So it is written in Psalm 95: "**Today, if you will hear His voice: Do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion. ... For forty years I was grieved with that generation. ... so I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest'**" (Psalm 95:7-11).

The letter to the Hebrews refers to Psalm 95 and then says: "**Since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it**" (Hebrews 4:1-2). Notice that this rest comes about through hearing the Word of God and believing it. Some of the Israelites did not attain the rest of the promised land of Canaan because they did not believe God would or could give this land to them.

We also have a promised land, the land of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal rest in heaven. How do we attain that rest? By hearing the Word of the Gospel and believing it. "**There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. ... Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience**" (Hebrews 4:9-11). God gives us spiritual rest through the Gospel of Jesus, for in the Gospel the Holy Spirit tells us of God's love for us in Christ, what Christ accomplished for us by His life, death, and resurrection, and what He now offers us: forgiveness of sins and eternal life through faith in Christ. We enjoy spiritual rest by faith in the Gospel, and we look forward to total and perfect enjoyment of that rest in the world to come. Jesus says to us: "**Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls**" (Matthew 11:28-29).

The Third Commandment in its original wording does not apply to us today. The apostle Paul wrote: "**Let no one judge you in food or drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ**" (Colossians 2:16-17).

For this reason, Luther's *Small Catechism* explanation of the Third Commandment does not refer to the Sabbath day at all but to the spiritual rest of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life that God gives to us through His Word. We could reword the Third Commandment in this way for us New Testament Christians: "Remember the spiritual rest that God gives you through His Word."

The *Book of Concord* (Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 352) gives us this English translation of the Third Commandment and Luther's explanation in his *Small Catechism*:

### The Third Commandment

You are to hallow the day of rest.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching or God's Word, but instead keep that Word holy and gladly hear and learn it.

Luther's *Large Catechism* adds:

*"According to its outward meaning, this commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely external matter, like the other regulations of the Old Testament associated with particular customs, persons, times, and places, from all of which we are now set free through Christ"* (p. 397).

*"God's Word is the treasure that makes everything holy. ... At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work is hallowed"* (p. 399).

In spite of God's clear word in Colossians 2:16-17 and in other passages, there are still some persons today who tell us that we must keep Saturday holy and do no work on Saturday. There are others who tell us that we must keep Sunday holy and do no work on Sunday. But no one should make strict Sabbath observance a matter of conscience for us Christians today. Nevertheless, this is what the Seventh Day Adventists teach: "The seventh day of the week is ... the Lord's Day. ... It should be observed from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday." The *Westminster Confession of Faith* of 1646, which is followed by some Presbyterians and Reformed churches today, declares that Sunday is the New Testament Sabbath: "God has particularly appointed one day in seven for a sabbath ..., the first day of the week. ... This Sabbath is kept holy ... when men ... do not only observe a holy rest all the day ... but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy" (§21 ¶7 and ¶8).

But there is no command from God that Saturday or Sunday or any other day must be observed as a holy day of rest without work or recreation. Most Christians hold worship services on Sunday as a matter of tradition and convenience, not because of a divine command. Every Sunday is an anniversary of Jesus' resurrection and the miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The true Sabbath rest of the New Testament is the spiritual rest provided by Jesus through His Gospel Word of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. This is the sabbath or rest that we should remember at all times. When Martha's sister Mary was sitting down at Jesus' feet and listening to His teaching, Jesus said: "**One thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her**" (Luke 10:42). On another occasion He said: "**Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!**" (Luke 11:28).

Since God has given us His Word, both law and Gospel, for our good, it is certainly sinful for us to despise His Word or make light of it. God surely wants us to read, think about, and study His Word. The long psalm (Psalm 119) asks and encourages us over and over again to use God's Word. Many other Bible passages do as well. Listen to these words from the letter to the Hebrews: "**We must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him?**" (Hebrews 2:1-3). God's law was given through angels, and disobedience to that law was punished. But now God has given us the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What an insult it is to God when we pay no attention to this Gospel! God Himself sent His Son to proclaim this Gospel, and His apostles risked their lives to proclaim it in the world. It is this Gospel Word that saves us. We cannot escape if we despise this Word, for only he who believes this Gospel will be saved.

God's Word is despised when people listen to God's Word in a careless spirit, as though they came only to be entertained. We should listen to God's Word seriously and strive to retain it in our minds and hearts, and we should think about what we have heard and put it into practice. The Lord God told His prophet Ezekiel: "**They come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain. Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them**" (Ezekiel 33:31-32).

James, the brother of our Lord, said to his listeners: **“Lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves”** (James 1:21-22). The apostle Peter gave similar instruction: **“Laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby”** (1 Peter 2:1-2).

Since we believe the Bible is God’s Word, God can talk to us not only in church services when we have God’s Word spoken to us, but also when we read the Bible regularly. Many church bodies today no longer believe the Bible to be God’s true Word. If they read the Bible, they accept only those parts that agree with their thinking. But we cannot retain the true Gospel of Christ Jesus very long if we no longer regard the Bible that contains this Gospel as God’s Word, as absolutely trustworthy and inerrant in everything it declares to us, even its history, its miracles, and its geography.

We should not despise or neglect God’s Word but regard it as God’s true Word and gladly hear it and learn it. This is what God tells us to do with His Word. **“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord”** (Colossians 3:16).

Since there are so many false teachers in the world, as well as false-teaching church bodies, it is important that we attend the worship services of true-teaching or orthodox church bodies, those that are faithful to the teaching of the Bible in every way. The Lutheran confessions agree with the Word of God, and therefore it is good that we seek out confessional Lutheran churches and listen to God’s Word as it is taught by them. When we find such a church and such worship, we should join in with them and listen carefully to the preaching and teaching that comes from that church. The letter to the Hebrews tells us: **“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching”** (Hebrews 10:23-25).

When we find faithful preachers and teachers of God’s Word, it is important not only that we listen to them and learn from them but that we support them by our prayers and gifts and honor them for the work of God that they do. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: **“We urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake”** (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **“God is not the author of confusion but of peace. ... Let all things be done decently and in order”** (1 Corinthians 14:33, 40). Since our Lord wants peace, not confusion, when Christians gather together for worship, it is generally a good thing to set up a definite time for congregational worship and follow some kind of regular order of service.

It is customary for Christians to follow a certain pattern of worship during the year, so that we remember and celebrate all the great acts of God. For example, we remember the coming of Christ to His people during the month of December, the birth of Christ on December 25, the suffering and death of Christ and His resurrection in the spring of the year, usually in April, and a few weeks later we commemorate the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday. God has not commanded us to observe these festivals, but they serve to help Christians remember in a certain order the wonderful things our God has done for us.

Respect for the Word of God leads us also to share that Word with those who do not yet know it and to strengthen those who have heard it so that they grow in their understanding and commitment. Jesus has given all of us Christians our marching orders: **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”** (Mark 16:15). The apostle Peter is addressing all Christians when he says: **“You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”** (1 Peter 2:9).

This Third Commandment as it applies to use today condemns and curses us all. For we have not always had the right attitude towards the Word of God and Christian worship. Have we not neglected the reading of God's Word at times? Even if we have regularly attended Christian church services, have we always paid close attention to what was being said? Have we been doers of the Word and not hearers only?

Our only hope for salvation is Jesus Christ, whose attitude towards the Word of God was always perfect. He taught God's Word faithfully during His ministry. When He was twelve years old, He was found in the temple at Jerusalem actively learning God's Word. He remained faithful to the very end, quoting Scripture from memory when He was hanging on the cross and bringing the comfort of God's Word to the repentant thief hanging next to Him. There was no sin in Him, and it was His holy suffering in our place and His precious blood as the Son of God that has atoned for all of our sins regarding how we have used or misused God's Word. We are saved only by trusting in our faithful Savior.

### **Questions**

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1. What makes the Third Commandment somewhat different from the others?
2. What did the Third Commandment require of the Israelites?
3. What was the punishment for failing to hallow the Sabbath?
4. How do we know that the Third Commandment means something different for us? Prove your answer correct from the Scriptures.
5. What does the word "sabbath" mean?
6. What kind of rest does our Lord want to give to us today?
7. How does He give us this rest?
8. What wrong teaching about the Sabbath do the Seventh Day Adventists and the Westminster Confession promote?
9. Why did Luther not mention rest from work in his explanation?
10. Why did Jesus commend Mary for what she was doing?
11. What are some of the ways we can honor the Word of God in our day?
12. What are some of the ways we can despise the Word of God?
13. Why is it important to have decency and order in our worship?
14. Why can we not be saved by observing the Third Commandment?
15. What is the only way of salvation? Why is this so?



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

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.4.3.4 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### The Moral Law: The Fourth Commandment

The first three of the Ten Commandments fit under the First Table of the Law: “**You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind**” (Matthew 22:37). The remaining seven commandments fit under the Second Table: “**You shall love your neighbor as yourself**” (Matthew 22:39). Our closest neighbors from our birth are our parents. We should love them as we love ourselves. But the Fourth Commandment directs us not only to love our parents but to honor them as God’s representatives whom God Himself has placed over us for our good.

Here is how God spoke the Fourth Commandment at Mt. Sinai and how Moses repeated the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy:

- “**Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you**” (Exodus 20:12).
- “**Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may be well with you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you**” (Deuteronomy 5:16).

This Fourth Commandment is part of God’s moral law that still applies to us today, for it is repeated and explained in the New Testament. Jesus included this commandment when He answered the question of a certain ruler who asked Him about inheriting eternal life. Jesus said to him: “**You know the commandments: ... Honor your father and your mother**” (Luke 18:20). Jesus accused the scribes and Pharisees of nullifying the Fourth Commandment by their traditions. He said: “**Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God’ – then he need not honor his father or mother.’ Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition**” (Matthew 15:3-6). These Jewish leaders were teaching the people that it was good to give as a gift to God for His worship the money that they should have given instead to their parents, but Jesus said that God’s commandment to honor one’s parents must be set above the leaders’ traditions.

The apostle Paul also repeated this commandment, writing to the Ephesians: “**Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother,’ which is the first commandment with promise: ‘that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth’**” (Ephesians 6:1-3). To the Colossians Paul wrote: “**Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord**” (Colossians 3:20). Paul also included being “**disobedient to parents**” (Romans 1:30) in his long list of “**things which are not fitting**” (Romans 1:28).

The *Book of Concord* (Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 352) gives us this English translation of the Forth Commandment and Luther’s explanation in his *Small Catechism*:

#### The Fourth Commandment

You are to honor your father and your mother.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority, but instead honor, serve, obey, love, and respect them.

Besides giving us our parents as His representatives over us, God has also placed other persons over us for our temporal and eternal benefit. Those who are substitutes for the parents in the home such as guardians, step parents, teachers, and older brothers and sisters are all persons whom we should honor and obey. Those over us in the church are spiritual fathers and mothers, and those over us in the government, in the schools, and in our employment are also gifts of God through whom He wishes to bless us.

The Bible clearly shows God's displeasure with those who despise parents and superiors, and who provoke them to anger. Consider the high priest Eli in the days of the judges. His two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, "**were corrupt; they did not know the LORD**" (1 Samuel 2:12). "**The sin of the young men was very great before the LORD**" (1 Samuel 2:17). Eli talked to them: "**Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all the people. No, my sons! For it is not a good report that I hear**" (1 Samuel 2:23-24). "**Nevertheless they did not heed the voice of their father**" (1 Samuel 2:25). God sent a man of God to tell Eli the bad news: "**This shall be a sign to you that will come upon your two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas: in one day they shall die, both of them**" (1 Samuel 2:34). And so it was that in a battle against the Philistines "**the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died**" (1 Samuel 4:11).

When David became king over Israel, his sons caused him much grief. His son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar, and then his son Absalom killed Amnon to avenge this crime. Absalom was then banished from the land, but when he was allowed to return, he plotted against his father and finally stole the kingdom from him. First he "**stole the hearts of the men of Israel**" by telling the people that he would be a better king than his father (2 Samuel 15:6). Then he publicly declared himself the king, and David had to escape. Absalom publicly dishonored his father by openly committing adultery with David's concubines (wives in a lower level of status). When Absalom then pursued David, he was killed in battle. What is worse, there was no sign of repentance on the part of Absalom, and for that reason David bitterly mourned his death, crying out: "**O Absalom my son, my son**" (2 Samuel 18:33). We are reminded of the proverb: "**The eye that mocks his father, and scorns obedience to his mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it**" (Proverbs 30:17).

Jacob had twelve sons, but he favored Joseph, the son of his favorite wife Rachel. As a result, Jacob's other sons hated Joseph, and when they had opportunity, they sold him into slavery and deceived their father into thinking that he had been killed by a wild animal. "**Then Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his waist, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted**" (Genesis 37:34-35). For many years they continued this deception, until finally in time of famine God saw to it that the brothers had to go to Egypt to buy food. By this time God had made Joseph the second in command in Egypt, and Joseph used this opportunity to bring his brothers to a sense of their great sin of hurting him and lying to their father.

The Bible account includes other examples of God's sudden judgment on those persons, young or old, who make fun of their parents or leaders in church or government. Elisha was a prophet of God in the days of the kings of Israel. One day "**some youths came from the city and mocked him, and said to him, 'Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!' ... And two female bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youths**" (2 Kings 2:23-24). It is a general rule according to God's promise that obedient children live longer and better lives than those young people who disrespect their elders and superiors.

The apostle Paul pointed out to the Romans that disobedience to governmental authority will call down a judgment from God on those who are disobedient: “**Whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ... If you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil**” (Romans 13:2-4).

Even though parents and other superiors have authority over those under them, they themselves remain subject to God. Therefore, God also calls on parents and superiors to carry out certain responsibilities. To parents, especially fathers, the apostle Paul wrote: “**You, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord**” (Ephesians 6:4). In a similar way Paul wrote to the Colossians: “**Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged**” (Colossians 3:21).

Taking care of one’s own family is important to God. The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: “**If any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God. ... But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever**” (1 Timothy 5:4, 8). Parents should provide for their children, and children should provide for their parents. This includes spiritual provision as well as material provision.

The duties of parents also include the rebuke and discipline of misbehaving children. The high priest Eli scolded his two wayward sons, but he did no more than scold them. He did not undertake any serious discipline. For this reason, the Lord said to Samuel concerning Eli: “**I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knows, because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them**” (1 Samuel 3:13). Many people today think that it is wrong to use physical discipline on children. But God Himself approves of bodily discipline when it is needed. The book of Proverbs includes many encouragements to parents to use bodily punishment on unruly children. For example, we read: “**Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die**” (Proverbs 23:13). Again we read: “**The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother**” (Proverbs 29:15).

But such discipline can go too far; that is why the apostle Paul warned fathers not to provoke their children to wrath, lest they be discouraged. Child abuse is also a sin, especially when parents punish their children out of personal annoyance instead of as loving representatives of God. Paul told Timothy that “**in the last days**” children would be “**disobedient to parents**”, and people, including parents, would be “**unloving, unforgiving, ... without self-control, brutal**” (2 Timothy 3:1-3). Children should have natural affection for their parents, and parents should have natural affection for their children, but in the last days in which we are now living even that is sometimes missing.

The role of mothers in the raising of children is especially important. For this reason, Paul told Titus to instruct the older women in his congregations to be “**teachers of good things – that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed**” (Titus 2:3-5). Paul instructed Timothy to encourage young widows to “**marry, bear children, manage the house**” (1 Timothy 5:14).

What is true of the family is also true of government. Both those who rule over others and those subject to them have duties under the Fourth Commandment. Government officials are over the citizens, but they are under God. The apostle Peter summarized their duties by saying that they are sent “**for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good**” (1 Peter 2:14). Citizens, on the other hand, are given this instruction: “**Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake**” (1 Peter 2:13). Paul told Titus: “**Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work**” (Titus 3:1).

These same principles apply to those in a master-servant relationship or an employer-employee relationship. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul wrote: “**Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him**” (Ephesians 6:5-9). The main thing to remember is that whatever job or task we have been given, we are to do our work for the Lord, and therefore do our best in everything we attempt. And, as Peter says, this means obedience and willing service “**not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh**” (1 Peter 2:18).

The only time we are excused from obeying our earthly superiors is when their commands contradict the commands of our God. In such cases Peter’s rule applies: “**We ought to obey God rather than men**” (Acts 5:29) and then accept the consequences of our disobedience cheerfully without grumbling, “**rejoicing**” with Jesus’ apostles “**that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name**” (Acts 5:41).

As we have seen, God is so serious about His Fourth Commandment, that He has even promised earthly blessings to the obedient. As Paul said, it “**is the first commandment with promise: ‘that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth’**” (Ephesians 6:2-3).

When Jesus told a “**certain ruler**” that he should honor his father and his mother, the ruler replied: “**All these things I have kept from my youth**” (Luke 18:21). But of course he had not kept this commandment or any of the others, and neither have we. Rather we must say with David: “**Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me**” (Psalm 51:5), and: “**Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions; according to Your mercy remember me, for Your goodness’ sake, O LORD**” (Psalm 25:7).

This Fourth Commandment, like all the others, points out our failings, and curses and condemns us for these failures. Our only hope is Jesus Christ, who was perfectly obedient to the Lord and His earthly parents in His infancy, in His childhood, in His adolescence, and even until the moment of His death on the cross. He was obedient in our place, and by His obedience He has removed our sins and given us His perfect righteousness, so that we stand before God as His well-beloved obedient children by faith in Him.

## Questions

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1. Which commandments fit under the First Table, and which under the Second Table?
2. Who are the first neighbors that we come into contact with on this earth?
3. Why are we to honor our parents and superiors as well as love them?
4. Provide evidence to show that the Fourth Commandment is part of God's moral law.
5. What bad examples did the sons of Eli, David, and Jacob give?
6. What are the duties of parents toward their children?
7. What are the duties of government officials?
8. What are the duties of earthly masters or employers?
9. What are some things to remember in the disciplining of children?
10. How do mothers contribute to the bringing up of their children?
11. When are we permitted to disobey those who are over us?
12. How did Jesus' apostles react when they were wrongly punished?
13. Why can we not be saved by obeying the Fourth Commandment?
14. What is the only way we can be saved?
15. What is the most common way children disobey their parents in your locale?
16. What is the most common way citizens disobey their government in your locale?



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

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.4.3.5 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### The Moral Law: The Fifth Commandment

The Fifth Commandment as God spoke it from Mt. Sinai is very short: "**You shall not murder**" (Exodus 20:13). When Moses repeated this commandment to the next generation, nothing was added to it, but he said simply: "**You shall not murder**" (Deuteronomy 5:17).

The Fifth Commandment is still God's will for us today because it is repeated in the New Testament. In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: "**You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire**" (Matthew 5:21-22). It is not only the action of taking another person's life that is condemned, but also any sin of the heart or mouth that devalues another person's life.

The apostle Paul explained to the Christians in Rome: "**Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments ... are all summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law**" (Romans 13:8-10). In other words, anything we think, do, or say to harm our neighbor is a sin against the Fifth Commandment, for love does not do any harm to a neighbor.

For this reason, Martin Luther explained the Fifth Commandment in this way in his *Small Catechism* (the *Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 352):

#### The Fifth Commandment

You are not to kill.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs.

By the Fifth Commandment God is protecting that which is man's greatest earthly possession: his own life. Here we must note that God makes a big distinction between human life and animal life. God does not forbid the killing of animal life if such killing does not inflict a loss on our neighbor. But human life is different from animal life, because only human beings were originally made in the image of God. We read in Genesis: "**God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them**" (Genesis 1:27).

After the great flood in the days of Noah God permitted human beings to use animals for food. He said: "**Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs**" (Genesis 9:3). But then God added: "**Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man**" (Genesis 9:6). With these words God instituted the death penalty for those who take man's life. In other words, all killing is not sinful. It is not sinful to kill an animal for food. It is not even sinful to kill a human being who is guilty of murder. In fact, because of the sacredness of human life, those guilty of taking such a life give up their own lives. For

this same reason God has given human government “**the sword**”, “**for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil**” (Romans 13:4).

The taking of human life is contrary to God’s will because a person’s earthly life is their time of grace during which they may have opportunity to hear God’s Word, both law and Gospel, and be led to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus as his Savior. Shortening a person’s time of grace may lead to their eternal death in hell. Paul said to the people of Athens: God “**gives to all life, breath, and all things ... so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him**” (Acts 17:25-27).

God is the one who gives life, and God is the one who takes life. “**I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal**” (Deuteronomy 32:39). Psalm 31 says: “**My times are in Your hand**” (Psalm 31:15). But God also gives the right to take life to human government, even as He gives the right to parents and superior to use physical discipline on those under them in keeping with their office. Thus, it is proper for human government to inflict the death penalty on defiant transgressors of the Second Table of the Law in order to carry out its duty of protecting law-abiding citizens. In the same way it is not against the Fifth Commandment for soldiers to inflict pain and even death in a time of war in order to protect the citizens of a nation against enemy attack, or for policemen and other officials to use physical force in the line of duty.

Many well-meaning persons who have respect for human life do not believe in capital punishment (the death penalty). They argue that such punishment is really murder, or that human governments are subject to error, or that such punishments do not deter criminals and reduce crime. But according to Old Testament civil law, capital punishment is a deterrent to crime, for it is stated more than once: “**And all Israel shall hear and fear, and not again do such wickedness as this among you**” (Deuteronomy 13:11).

Christians who serve in the government as judges, jurors, executioners, policemen, and soldiers are not sinning against the Fifth Commandment when they inflict the death penalty or lesser penalties on evildoers or their country’s enemies in order to preserve civil peace. Notice that when soldiers came to John the Baptist to ask him how they should give evidence of their repentance, he did not tell them to quit their jobs as soldiers. Rather he told them: “**Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages**” (Luke 3:14).

Nevertheless, what is not forbidden to human government is forbidden to us as individuals. What are some of the ways in which individuals sin against the Fifth Commandment? Taking the life of another human being, as Cain killed his brother Abel, is forbidden; it is murder. God said to Cain: “**What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground. So now you are cursed from the earth**” (Genesis 4:10-11).

Taking the life of someone else indirectly is also murder. King David did not kill Uriah with his own hands, but he was nevertheless guilty of murder, for he told his general Joab to put Uriah in the front lines, so that the Ammonite enemies would kill him in battle. His wicked plan succeeded, but the Biblical account says: “**The thing that David had done displeased the LORD**” (2 Samuel 11:27).

The life of a human being is so precious that a person should try to avoid, as much as possible, doing anything that might endanger anyone’s life. For example, two civil laws in the Old Testament were intended to prevent personal injury or loss of life. Moses told the people as they were about to enter the land of Canaan: “**When you build a new house, then you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring guilt of bloodshed on your household if anyone falls from it**” (Deuteronomy 22:8). Another rule: “**If the ox tended to thrust with its horn in times past, and it has been made known to his owner, and he has not kept it confined, so that it has killed a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned and its owner also shall be put to death**” (Exodus 21:29).

In our world today we can think of reckless driving or failure to use safety measures as possible ways in which life can be endangered. We should not want to bodily hurt or harm our neighbor in any way.

Since our times are in the Lord's hands, not our own, we should do nothing to shorten our own lives, such as committing suicide, or neglecting our own health by recklessness, overeating, drunkenness, drug abuse, or any such activity. It is written: **"Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's"** (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). When the jailer at Philippi thought that his prisoners had escaped, he was about to take his own life. But the apostle Paul cried out: **"Do yourself no harm, for we are all here"** (Acts 16:28).

Since all human beings were made in the image of God, including babies in the womb that have not yet been born, it is against God's will to take the life of an unborn infant. Human life begins at conception, for David said: **"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin my mother conceived me"** (Psalm 51:5). Notice that as soon as David was conceived, he existed as an individual; he calls himself **"me"** from the moment of his conception. It is tragic that so many so-called enlightened countries, such as the United States, Russia, and China, permit and even promote abortion, so that in the last fifty years or so millions of babies in the womb have been murdered. A mother should be the last one to take her own unborn baby's life.

In our days more and more countries permit euthanasia, that is, mercy killing, which is intended to end a person's life when that life is considered no longer worth saving because of old age or severe illness. But how can this be right since our times are in the Lord's hands?

There are many other ways in which we can sin against the Fifth Commandment. Instead of waiting for the government to act against a criminal, we can take the law into our own hands. No one has given us this right. We can deliberately hurt someone else by inflicting bodily injury. We can also make someone's life miserable by name-calling or through deceit. We also begin to sin against the Fifth Commandment when we keep anger in our hearts, plot revenge against someone who has hurt us, or bear a grudge. All of this is contrary to the law of love. The apostle John tells us: **"Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him"** (1 John 3:15). The apostle Paul warns us: **"Let all bitterness, wrath, clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice"** (Ephesians 4:31). **"Do not let the sun go down on your wrath"** (Ephesians 4:26). **"Vengeance is Mine; I will repay,' says the Lord"** (Romans 12:19).

We sin against the Fifth Commandment not only by what we do, but by what we fail to do. We ought to do all we can to help our neighbor, especially when that neighbor is in need and we have the means to help them. James writes: **"To him who knows to do good, and does not do it, to him it is sin"** (James 4:17). In Jesus' description of the last judgment in Matthew 25, the unbelievers on the left hand (the goats) are condemned not for what they did but for what they failed to do. The Judge will say: **"I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me"** (Matthew 25:42-43). Jesus explained His words: **"Inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me"** (Matthew 25:45).

The love we show to our neighbor by helping them in their bodily needs is but a reflection of the love God has shown to us by helping us and saving us. Paul says: **"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you"** (Ephesians 4:32). God's love extends to the ends of the earth, wanting to save every single soul. So also we are told by Jesus Himself: **"Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust"** (Matthew 5:44-45).

The Fifth Commandment, like all the others, shows us our sin and our guilt. The Fifth Commandment points out that each one of us is actually a murderer in God's sight, because we have hurt our neighbor in one way or another by thought, word, or deed, and we have failed to help them in every situation in life. In fact, James teaches us that showing favoritism to one person over another is a sin against the Fifth Commandment. He writes: **"If you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law"** (James 2:9-11).

Our only hope for salvation is Jesus Christ, who showed perfect love for His fellowman at all times, in all places, and in all situations. The apostle Peter summarized Jesus' life by saying He **"went about doing good"** (Acts 10:38). Not only was Jesus perfectly obedient to this Fifth Commandment throughout His life, but in His suffering on the cross He took on Himself the full punishment for all human transgressions against the Fifth Commandment and all other commandments. For it is written: **"Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 'who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth'; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree"** (1 Peter 2:21-24). Only by faith in Jesus can we stand as righteous in the sight of God, washed clean from all our sins.

### Questions

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1. What is murder in the sight of God?
2. What is God protecting by means of the Fifth Commandment?
3. When is the act of killing someone not murder in God's sight?
4. What distinction has God made between human life and animal life?
5. What is meant by the expression "time of grace"?
6. Who has the right to take life or to punish in a physical way?
7. How do we know that God approves of capital punishment?
8. What did God have to say about the murderous actions of Cain and David?
9. What kind of recklessness endangers life in your locale?
10. Why is suicide a sin against God?
11. What makes abortion a sin against the Fifth Commandment?
12. Why is it that many people believe abortion is not a sin?
13. How do people sin against the Fifth Commandments by their words?
14. How can we sin against the Fifth Commandment by doing nothing?
15. How many persons have sinned against the Fifth Commandment? Have you sinned against the Fifth Commandment?
16. What is our only hope for salvation and eternal life?



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

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.4.3.6 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### The Moral Law: The Sixth Commandment

By means of the Fifth Commandment God protects our life and the life of our neighbor. By means of the Sixth Commandment God protects our wife or husband and the wife or husband of our neighbor. Thus, God protects marriage, which, next to our life, is the most important blessing we have on this earth.

The commandment itself is very short: **“You shall not commit adultery”** (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18). God was certainly serious about this commandment, for in Israel’s civil law He demanded the death penalty for those who were openly guilty of adultery: **“The man who commits adultery with another man’s wife, he who commits adultery with his neighbor’s wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death. The man who lies with his father’s wife has uncovered his father’s nakedness; both of them shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon them. If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall surely be put to death. They have committed perversion. Their blood shall be upon them. If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon them. ... If a man mates with an animal, he shall surely be put to death, and you shall kill the animal. If a woman approaches any animal and mates with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal. They shall surely be put to death. Their blood is upon them”** (Leviticus 20:10-16).

There is a great difference between such laws and the civil laws of most countries today. The sin of adultery has become so common among us that it is almost expected of both young and old alike to either practice or at least endorse sexual intercourse with someone who is not your husband or wife.

In the narrow sense adultery is a sin committed by married people who are not faithful to their spouse. But in a broad sense adultery is any thought, word, or deed that dishonors God’s institution of marriage. The terms “fornication” and “sexual immorality” are used for sexual intercourse between persons who are not married to each other.

Even though the world pays little attention to the Sixth Commandment in most modern countries, this commandment is still God’s will for us today. It is part of God’s moral law because it is repeated in the New Testament. Jesus said: **“What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man”** (Mark 7:20-23).

Those who openly sin against the Sixth Commandment without regret or repentance may be considered law-abiding citizens by the civil government, but that is not God’s verdict. The apostle Paul wrote: **“Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God”** (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Paul also wrote: **“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God”** (Galatians 5:19-21).

It is also written: **“Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Hebrews 13:4).**

Martin Luther gave this explanation of the Sixth Commandment in his *Small Catechism* (the *Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 353):

#### The Sixth Commandment

You are not to commit adultery.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honors his or her spouse.

In order to gain a better understanding of the sin of adultery, it is good for us first of all to contemplate the blessings of marriage. We need to understand that God instituted marriage and He alone has the authority to tell us what marriage is, and how it is to be put into practice. Nowadays people think that marriage as we have it today has gradually evolved along with mankind from some kind of primitive notion developed by man himself. For this reason, they believe that person has the right to change marriage today into what they would like it to be.

But God Himself instituted marriage on the sixth day of world history in the Garden of Eden when He created woman from the man and gave her to the man as his wife. From the beginning God intended marriage to be a lifelong union between one man and one woman. **“And the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make a helper comparable to him”** (Genesis 2:18). **“And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man”** (Genesis 2:21-22).

It is not clear who spoke the words of Genesis 2:24, but whether it was Adam or Moses, it is the word of God through one of them: **“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh”** (Genesis 2:24). Jesus referred to this passage when He said to the Pharisees: **“Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate”** (Matthew 19:4-6).

Adam was a biological male, and Eve was a biological female, and it was those two and no others that God brought together in the first marriage. After sin entered the world, it was not long before a man named Lamech took it upon himself to define marriage in his own way: **“Lamech took for himself two wives”** (Genesis 4:19). But this was not God’s plan.

In the years after the flood having more than one wife (polygamy) became common practice among unbelievers in certain areas, and there is evidence that some believers in the promise of the Savior followed this practice also. For example, Jacob, Elkanah, and David had more than one wife. Even though God did not intervene in these marriages, and Israelite civil law made allowance for plural wives (Deuteronomy 21:1-17), this did not alter God’s original institution of marriage. Jesus’ words to the Pharisees with reference to divorce, **“From the beginning it was not so”** (Matthew 19:8), certainly apply also to the practice of polygamy.

In the New Testament polygamy is not an option for believers in Christ, for the apostle Paul wrote: **“Because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband”** (1 Corinthians 7:2). Then Paul added these words: **“Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt**

**you because of your lack of self-control”** (1 Corinthians 7:3-5). Following these instructions would be impossible in a plural marriage.

The death of either spouse brings the marriage to an end. In the same chapter Paul writes: **“A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes”** (1 Corinthians 7:39). The same would apply also to a husband.

It is clear from the Genesis account that the primary blessing of marriage is companionship. The words of God are clear: **“It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him”** (Genesis 2:18). A man and a woman united in marriage for life are good for each other. They help each other; they encourage each other; they comfort each other. King Lemuel’s mother taught him these words about marriage: **“Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her. So he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life”** (Proverbs 31:10-12).

The fall of man into sin has made marriage less than ideal in many cases. Men have abused their wives, and wives have made life miserable for their husbands. The woman Abigail was married to a very foolish man named Nabal. Her servant reported to her concerning her husband: **“He is such a scoundrel that one cannot speak to him”** (1 Samuel 25:17). Abigail herself said to David: **“Please, let not my lord regard this scoundrel Nabal. For as his name is, so is he: Nabal** (which means “fool” in Hebrew) **is his name, and folly is with him”** (1 Samuel 25:25). A little later the Bible reports that Nabal **“was very drunk”** and **“then it happened after about ten days, that the LORD struck Nabal, and he died”** (1 Samuel 25:36-38). There are likewise wives whose attitude and behavior prove this proverb correct: **“Better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman”** (Proverbs 21:19). **“It is better to dwell in a corner of a housetop, than in a house shared with a contentious woman”** (Proverbs 25:24).

God’s intention for marriage was that each person would be a blessing to the other. Besides companionship, another primary blessing of marriage is the blessing of children and the blessing of family life. **“Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them”** (Psalm 127:3-5). Even before sin entered the world, God said to Adam and Eve: **“Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it”** (Genesis 1:28).

Many in our world today do not agree that children are a blessing. Some couples even enter into marriage with the intention of having no children. But with few exceptions parents should look forward to having children. While birth control in-itself isn’t sinful, all methods of birth control are subject to abuse. Christians who deliberately limit their families must consider whether their reasons for doing so are God-pleasing.

Besides the blessings of companionship and the blessings of family life, marriage is a blessing from God because it permits a man and a woman to have a sexual relationship with each other without guilt or shame. God Himself is the originator of sexual pleasure, for He created the man and the woman to enjoy the body of the other sex, as we read in the passage from 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 quoted above. Sexual intercourse without sin is indeed a blessing from the Lord. It is written: **“Drink water from your own cistern, and running water from your own well. Should your fountains be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be only your own, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love”** (Proverbs 5:15-19). Single men or single women who have a desire to have a sexual partner should ask God to guide them to a suitable marriage partner. The apostle Paul, who was single himself, advised: **“If they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion”** (1 Corinthians 7:9).

It is wrong to demand marriage of everyone, and it is wrong to forbid marriage to anyone. There are some who can remain chaste and sexually pure without marriage, like the apostle Paul and our Lord Jesus. Paul says: **“Each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that”** (1 Corinthians 7:7). But he also says that it is a doctrine of devils to forbid marriage: **“The Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry”** (1 Timothy 4:1-3). The Roman Catholic Church is guilty of such a false doctrine, forbidding their priests, monks, and nuns the privilege of marriage. This rule of theirs has only led to greater sin.

Sins against the Sixth Commandment are common in our day. Let us first consider the various ways married people sin against this commandment. Married people commit adultery when one spouse is unfaithful to the other spouse by having sexual intercourse with someone outside of the marriage. David sinned against the Sixth Commandment when he invited a neighbor's wife to his home and had sexual intercourse with her. The woman, Bathsheba, had a husband to whom she should have been faithful. Then David sinned even more by having her husband Uriah killed in battle and then arranging a quick marriage with Bathsheba. The Bible says: **“The thing that David had done displeased the LORD”** (2 Samuel 11:27). God sent the prophet Nathan to David to call him to repentance: **“Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in His sight?”** (2 Samuel 12:9).

John the Baptist boldly denounced his own ruler, Herod Antipas, saying to him: **“It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife”** (Mark 6:18). Herod had deserted his own wife and stolen the wife of his brother Philip. This woman, Herodias, later saw to it that John the Baptist was killed for condemning her marriage to Herod.

The Sixth Commandment is transgressed by what is called “malicious desertion”. This takes place when a husband or wife simply walks out of the marriage and does not return. Job requirements sometimes make it necessary for marriage partners to live apart from each other for a time, such as when a soldier is summoned to military duty. But malicious desertion involves desertion for no good reason, contrary to God's clear Word. Paul says: **“A wife is not to depart from her husband. ... And a husband is not to divorce his wife”** (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

If malicious desertion happens and there is no possibility of restoring the marriage, the one who is left behind is no longer bound to the partner who has deserted. Paul says: **“If the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases”** (1 Corinthians 7:15). In other words, the partner has deserted the other has ended the marriage, and the partner who has been deserted is no longer bound to the marriage and is free to marry someone else.

In rare instances, because of sin, it may be difficult for a husband or wife to remain in a marriage. In such cases God's Word through His apostle Paul may be applicable: **“A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband”** (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

Since marriage is intended to be a lifelong union between one man and one woman, any time there is a divorce, sin is involved. When Jesus was asked a question about marriage and divorce, He replied: **“I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery”** (Matthew 19:9). There are only two situations presented in Scripture that allow for divorce. One exception, as Jesus points out, is in the case of sexual immorality or sexual unfaithfulness. In other words, the spouse who is the victim of unfaithfulness may divorce the unfaithful partner. The victim does not have to divorce the unfaithful partner but may do so without committing adultery. The other exception is a person who has been deserted may get a legal divorce from the deserter, as we explained above.

The civil laws in most countries today permit divorce for many reasons that are not in agreement with Bible teaching. But as believers in Jesus, we should be willing to follow a higher standard than that of the world.

Besides the above outward transgressions against the Sixth Commandment, anything a married partner does by thought, word, or deed to harm the marriage is a sin. Obviously, there has never been a marriage partner who has been a perfect partner at all times and in all ways. All married people need a Savior from sin: Jesus Christ, the only One who has always been without sin.

But it is not only married persons who sin against the Sixth Commandment. Unmarried persons can sin against this commandment as well. Unmarried persons as well as married persons sin against the Sixth Commandment and the Fifth Commandment by sexual assault or rape. David's own son, Amnon, raped his half-sister, Tamar. The Bible account says: **"He took hold of her and said to her, 'Come, lie with me, my sister.' But she answered him, 'No, my brother, do not force me, for no such thing should be done in Israel.' ... However, he would not heed her voice; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her"** (2 Samuel 13:11-14).

Even when it is not forced, sexual intercourse between persons who are not married to each other is **"fornication"** (also called **"sexual immorality"**). This includes sexual intercourse with prostitutes, strangers, and between people who are planning to get married to each other in the future but have not yet married each other. Prostitution of all kinds is condemned by God's Word. An active sexual life apart from marriage is condemned by God's Word. Premarital sexual intercourse is not tolerated by God in His Word. The use of birth control pills and other means of contraception and the wide use of antibiotics to control venereal disease have made people less concerned about sexual sin. But God is not mocked. Unrepentant fornicators will be judged.

Sexual immorality was common among the Greeks to whom the apostle Paul brought the Gospel of Christ so there are many warnings in his letters against sexual immorality (fornication). To the Corinthians he wrote: **"Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For 'the two,' He says, 'shall become one flesh.' But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him. Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body"** (1 Corinthians 6:15-18).

In our times there are even church leaders who defend and even promote sexual intercourse between two or more men or between two or more women or any combination of partners. But God condemns such sin in the New Testament just as He had in the Old Testament. Speaking of the idolaters in the heathen world, the apostle Paul says: **"Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for 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"** (Romans 1:24-27).

God condemns all these sexual activities and lusts outside of marriage such as lesbianism, homosexuality, sodomy, and incest. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: **"Fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God"** (Ephesians 5:3-5). There can be no such thing as a godly marriage between persons of the same sex.

The temptations to sexual sin are many in our day: jokes that make fun of marriage, indecent books and magazines that promote sexual sin, indecent movies and photography, the pornography that is readily available on the Internet and on television or in movies, indecent advertising, and indecent dancing, all of which tend to degrade marriage or arouse lust. Alcohol and certain drugs also lead people to lose their inhibitions and do things that otherwise they would not do. Jesus said that adultery begins in the heart with lustful thoughts, for He said: **"I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart"** (Matthew 5:28).

Since lust can be aroused by indecent exposure, such as total or partial nudity, stripping, or immodest clothing on the part of both men and women, we have this word from the apostle Paul: "**I desire ... that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation**" (1 Timothy 2:8-9). We need to remember that David's great sin of adultery and murder started with lust in his heart. "**From the roof he saw a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful to behold**" (2 Samuel 11:2).

God intended sexual pleasure as a blessing, and it is a blessing within a loving marriage. But it is important that marriage and the relationship between men and women be conducted according to God's principles. Most Christian churches today have set aside these principles as being old-fashioned and out of date in today's society. From the beginning of creation God has established the headship principle, for God created the man first, and He created the woman to be man's helper. For this reason, Paul wrote to Timothy: "**I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression**" (1 Timothy 2:12-14). Our confessional Lutheran congregations follow this principle by not permitting women to be pastors or teachers of males or to have authority over men in the voters' assemblies. Women in the congregation can be teachers of women and children and can serve as men's helpers in many different ways.

The same thing is true of marriage. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "**I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God**" (1 Corinthians 11:3). In explanation he says: "**Man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man**" (1 Corinthians 11:8-9). As men and women are not the same biologically, so also they have not been given the same roles in marriage or in the church. To the Ephesians Paul wrote: "**The husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church**" (Ephesians 5:23).

As far as sin and salvation are concerned, men and women are equal. For Paul wrote to the Galatians: "**There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus**" (Galatians 3:28).

It is also true that just as women need men, men need women, for Paul says: "**Neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God**" (1 Corinthians 11:11-12).

It is important for Christian husbands and wives to pay close attention to the Lord's instructions for them. Notice that the model for the husband is Christ Himself, and the model for the wife is Christ's Church. These are Paul's words: "**Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. ... Let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband**" (Ephesians 5:22-33).

In a similar way Paul wrote to the Christians in Colosse: "**Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them**" (Colossians 3:18-19). The apostle Peter was in full agreement, writing: "**Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands. ... Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered**" (1 Peter 3:1-7).

Thus, wives keep the Sixth Commandment by submitting to their husbands in love and honoring and respecting them as their God-given heads. Husbands keep the Sixth Commandment by loving their wives unselfishly and honoring them as their God-given companions.

Since marriage is a lifelong bond of mutual love and respect, a Christian should be very careful in choosing a marriage partner. They should seek the advice and consent of parents. External beauty, attractiveness, or wealth is not as important as inner spirit. Unity of faith in Christ is of the utmost importance. And do not forget prayer.

Marriage customs may differ greatly from one country to another. While marriage is a divinely ordained institution, many governments have their own requirements for a legal marriage. Among Christians in our American church body the usual practice for couples intending to marry is this: they become engaged (betrothed), which is an unforced solemn promise to marry in the future that a Christian cannot take lightly, obtain a state marriage license, and then have a wedding ceremony by an approved representative of the state.

Unmarried persons should prepare for marriage by remembering that their bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, as the apostle Paul said: **“Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s”** (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Joseph was a handsome young man in Potiphar’s house. Temptation came to him from Potiphar’s wife, who said to him: **“Lie with me.”** But Joseph resisted her invitation and said words to her that people today can say in similar circumstances: **“How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?”** (Genesis 39:7-9). She persisted in her seduction, until finally **“she caught him by his garment, saying, ‘Lie with me.’ But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside”** (Genesis 39:12).

Like Joseph, we today should run away from sexual temptation, keep ourselves busy with clean fun and decent entertainment and hard work (sports, school projects, hobbies, jobs), and pray for God’s help to keep us chaste and decent. Paul wrote: **“Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things”** (Philippians 4:8).

When we consider all that is involved in living according to the Sixth Commandment, it should be clear to all of us that we have sinned against this commandment in thought, word, and deed. All adulterers and fornicators deserve the penalty of eternal death. Therefore, this commandment, like all the others, shows us our sin and hopelessness under the law. Our only hope is Jesus Christ, who was pure and spotless in thought, word, and deed, as it is written: **“He is pure. ... In Him there is no sin”** (1 John 3:3, 5). He extends to us in the Gospel His perfect righteousness, and He has been punished for our many sins against the Sixth Commandment. Through **“the washing of water by the word”** Christ presents us to Himself **“a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing”** (Ephesians 5:26-27). The filthiness of our thoughts, words, and deeds is forgiven, and we pray with penitent David: **“Create in me a clean heart, O God”** (Psalm 51:10). Remember: **“The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin”** (1 John 1:7), including sexual sin.

## Questions

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1. What does God protect by means of the Sixth Commandment?
2. How do we know that the Sixth Commandment is part of God's moral law?
3. What does God's Word teach us about polygamy?
4. Why do we human beings not have the right to change marriage as we like?
5. What are the three main blessings God gives us through marriage?
6. Does God command or forbid marriage? Explain your answer.
7. How did David sin against the Sixth Commandment?
8. What is meant by malicious desertion?
9. In what circumstances is divorce permissible?
10. Name some of the temptations that lead unmarried people astray.
11. What does God say about homosexuality?
12. Why is it contrary to God's will for women to be pastors?
13. What good example did Joseph give for all believers?
14. What are the primary duties of husbands and wives?
15. Why can't we be saved by keeping the Sixth Commandment?
16. What is our only hope for salvation? Why is this true?



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

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.4.3.7 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### The Moral Law: The Seventh Commandment

By means of the Fifth Commandment God protects our lives and bodies and the lives and bodies of our neighbors. By means of the Sixth Commandment God protects our marriages and the marriages of our neighbors. By means of the Seventh Commandment God protects our property and the property of our neighbors. God spoke these words from Mt. Sinai, and Moses repeated them to the Israelites as they were about to enter the promised land of Canaan: **You shall not steal** (Exodus 20:15; Deuteronomy 5:19).

Israelite civil law demanded the death penalty for those guilty of stealing a human being and selling that person as a slave: **He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death** (Exodus 21:16). Those guilty of stealing animals or property had to pay restitution: **If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep. If the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt for his bloodshed** (Exodus 22:1-2). Other similar laws were enacted to punish all those guilty of theft (Exodus 22:3-15).

The Seventh Commandment is still God's will for us today because it is repeated in the New Testament. Jesus said: **From within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man** (Mark 7:21-23).

So also the apostle Paul wrote: **Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God** (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). To the Ephesians Paul wrote: **Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need** (Ephesians 4:28).

Martin Luther explained the Seventh Commandment in these words in his *Small Catechism* (the *Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 353):

#### The Seventh Commandment

You are not to steal.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither take our neighbor's money or property nor acquire them by using shoddy merchandise or crooked deals, but instead help them to improve and protect their property and income.

In reality God is the owner of all property, money, or goods. The very wealthy man Job lost almost all of his property in one day, but he recognized that everything he owned was on temporary loan from God, and that God had the right to take it away again. He said: **Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD** (Job 1:21). If we follow the account of Job all the way to the end, we learn that **the LORD restored Job's losses .... Indeed the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. ... For he had**

**fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, one thousand yoke of oxen, and one thousand female donkeys" (Job 42:10-12).**

At any time God can make anyone rich or poor or in between. "**The earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein**" (Psalm 24:1). "**Every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. ... If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all its fullness**" (Psalm 50:10-12). Therefore the proverb says: "**The rich and the poor have this in common, the LORD is the maker of them all**" (Proverbs 22:2).

In one sense everything that God has belongs to those who believe in Him, for we know that God uses what He has for the benefit of those who love Him. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "**All things are yours: whether ... the world or life or death, or things present or things to come – all are yours. And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's**" (1 Corinthians 3:21-23). "**We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose**" (Romans 8:28).

But the Seventh Commandment teaches us that not one of us is entitled to possess or use what God has given to someone else as his property. In other words, God has established the concept of private property, so that what God has given to one individual, family, or corporation belongs to them and to no one else on this earth.

It is true that the early Christian congregation in Jerusalem voluntarily practiced a type of communal living for a while in which what belonged to one belonged to all. We read in Acts 2: "**Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need**" (Acts 2:44-45). This practice continued for some time, for we read in Acts 4: "**Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common**" (Acts 4:32).

But even in Jerusalem each person still retained his own property if that is what he wanted. We learn this from the tragedy of a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira. When other members, such as Barnabas, were selling their property and giving the proceeds to the common treasury, Ananias and Sapphira wanted to have the praise for doing the same thing. But they did not really want to share all the proceeds from the sale with the congregation; yet they wanted the congregation to think that they had given it all, just like Barnabas. But the apostle Peter was given insight into what they were plotting, and he said to Ananias: "**Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God**" (Acts 5:3-4).

Notice that Peter defended the concept of private property. Ananias owned this property, and he did not have to sell it. After he sold it, he did not have to give all of the proceeds to the congregation. The sin of Ananias was that he wanted honored for giving all to the church when he had only given some of it. Sapphira, his wife, agreed to this deception also, and God taught the whole congregation what He thinks about hypocrisy by causing the sudden death of both Ananias and Sapphira. "**Great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things**" (Acts 5:11).

God is the owner of all things, but He makes each one of us a steward or caretaker of a certain portion of His possessions. There are various ways God has chosen to give us our temporary property and possessions. God may loan us what we have by leading people who have property to give some of that property to us. When Jesus was still an infant, the Magi from the East gave His family three gifts: "**gold, frankincense, and myrrh**" (Matthew 2:11). For a limited time, Jesus and His family were in possession of these treasures, which they probably used for their sustenance during their stay in Egypt.

King Ahab's neighbor, Naboth, owned a vineyard which he had inherited from his fathers. When Ahab wanted to buy it, Naboth refused to sell it, because it was his rightful inheritance. But Ahab and

Jezebel, his wife, did not respect Naboth's right to retain his property and schemed to take it away from him. After they succeeded in putting Naboth to death and stealing his vineyard, God's prophet Elijah said to Ahab: "**Have you murdered and also taken possession? ... In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, dogs shall lick your blood, even yours**" (1 Kings 21:19).

Other legitimate ways we may acquire property are by purchase. For example, Abraham bought a place to bury his wife Sarah for "**four hundred shekels of silver**" (Genesis 23:16). Another way is by trade. For example, when a person trades produce from his garden or field for an article clothing.

But the chief way in which God gives or loans to us what we have is through our own hard work. God said to Adam after he fell into sin: "**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).

God does not want us to be lazy beggars and live from the generosity of others. The apostle Paul wrote: "**We urge you, brethren, ... to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing**" (1 Thessalonians 4:10-12). Jesus said: "**The laborer is worthy of his wages**" (Luke 10:7).

Not only do we need to work to gain what we have, but we need God to bless our work so that we succeed. God blessed Jacob's labors for his uncle Laban over a period of twenty years, so that he said when he returned: "**O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you': I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies**" (Genesis 32:9-10). God had made Jacob rich by blessing his difficult work for a difficult boss.

Again and again God's Word assures us that God will take care of our earthly needs through our labors. "**When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you**" (Psalm 128:2). "**He who tills his land will be satisfied with bread**" (Proverbs 12:11). Laziness is not a virtue. The apostle Paul wrote: "**When we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread**" (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12).

Another way in which God gives us our property and possessions is through interest on investments. That is, we loan what we have to a bank or some other entity and later get back our money with interest. Jesus told a parable about a nobleman who loaned money to his servants and told them to do business with his money. But one of his servants did nothing with what was given to him but simply kept it in a handkerchief. When the nobleman returned, he said to this servant: "**Why then did you not put my money in the bank, that at my coming I might have collected it with interest?**" (Luke 19:23).

After God has given to us our property and goods by means of a gift from others, by inheritance, by purchase or trade, by our working for it, or by earning interest on a loan, it is our responsibility to be good stewards of what we have been given.

First of all, God wants us to use our property and possessions to provide for ourselves and our own families. It is the responsibility of family members to care for one another, for Paul wrote to Timothy: "**If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an infidel**" (1 Timothy 5:8) This applies also to children with respect to their parents: "**If any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God**" (1 Timothy 5:4)

As citizens of a country with a government over us, it is also our responsibility to use some of what God has given us to support our nation or state and its services. When Jesus was asked about paying taxes to the Roman government, He responded: **“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”** (Matthew 22:21). Therefore the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome concerning governmental authority: **“He is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers, attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor”** (Romans 13:4-7).

Christians are also expected to support those who give their time and talents for the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. Paul wrote to the Galatians: **“Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches”** (Galatians 6:6). To the Corinthians he wrote: **“If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? ... Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel”** (1 Corinthians 9:11-14). Preachers of the Gospel should be paid for their labors.

There are some who say that it is necessary for Christians to give a tenth (or tithe) of their income for the work of the church. This was part of Old Testament civil law, but the offering of a tithe is not commanded anywhere in the New Testament. It is part of the Old Testament law that no longer applies to us. In many cases Christians may want to give much more than a tenth. Jesus commended the widow who threw two small copper coins into the temple treasury, saying to His disciples: **“Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood”** (Mark 12:43-44).

It is also part of our Christian responsibility to use some of our resources to help the poor and the needy. Paul wrote to the Galatians: **“As we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith”** (Galatians 6:10). Solomon said: **“He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord”** (Proverbs 19:17). In fact, one of our motivations for working hard and earning money should be this, that then we can give it away to help others, as Paul said: **“Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need”** (Ephesians 4:28). Jesus Himself said: **“Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away”** (Matthew 5:42).

There are poor Christians and there are rich Christians, and there are many who are neither rich nor poor. Whenever God has given us more than our needs, it is important that we reflect on how much we spend on recreation, entertainment, and luxuries, rather than on the necessities of life. Does God approve of the way we handle our money and property?

As in all aspects of Christian life, the attitude we have towards our property and possessions is more important than the size of our bank account or the amounts given for different purposes. It is surely God’s will that we be honest, hard-working, thrifty, unselfish, generous, and helpful to others. God’s Word has very much to say about such things. Here are a few examples:

- **“Better is the poor who walks in his integrity than one perverse in his ways, though he be rich”** (Proverbs 28:6).
- **“Better is a little with righteousness, than vast revenues without justice”** (Proverbs 16:8).
- **“He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much”** (Luke 16:10).
- **“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might”** (Ecclesiastes 9:10).
- **“As a door turns on its hinges, so does the lazy man on his bed”** (Proverbs 26:14).

- When Jesus fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fish, there was some food left over. Jesus said to His disciples: **“Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost”** (John 6:12).
- Jesus told a parable about **“a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods”** (Luke 16:1). This man was an **“unjust steward”** (Luke 16:8).
- Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being”** (1 Corinthians 10:24). In other words, we should love our neighbors as ourselves, and even put our neighbor’s needs before our own. Abraham gave Lot, his nephew, the first choice, even though Abraham was the older of the two (Genesis 13:8-10).
- The Good Samaritan went out of his way to help the half-dead man by the roadside. After telling this man’s story, Jesus said: **“Go and do likewise”** (Luke 10:37).

Above all, the Seventh Commandment is fulfilled when we are grateful for what God has given us, and we are fully content and satisfied with what we have. The letter to the Hebrews says: **“Be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’”** (Hebrews 13:5). The apostle Paul wrote: **“Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content”** (1 Timothy 6:6-8).

It is not wrong to enjoy and take pleasure in God’s gifts to us. The apostle Paul told Timothy that it was a doctrine of demons to forbid the eating of certain foods, for these foods are **“foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer”** (1 Timothy 4:3-5).

What are some of the common ways in which the Seventh Commandment is transgressed? Any kind of robbery and burglary are forbidden. Jesus told the story of a man who **“went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead”** (Luke 10:30). In this case both the Fifth Commandment and the Seventh Commandment were violated. We don’t know what the thieves stole, other than the man’s clothing, but no matter whether it was a big item or a small item, it was stealing.

Many times, stealing is accomplished without the use of force, as in the case of Judas Iscariot, who used his position as the treasurer of the disciples to pocket some of the contents for his personal use. John’s Gospel reports: **“He was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it”** (John 12:6). Today there are the shoplifters, pickpockets, as well as businessmen who mishandle company accounts and funds in order to gain wealth for themselves. The destruction of other people’s property through vandalism is also a form of stealing. But God’s Word is very clear: **“Let him who stole steal no longer”** (Ephesians 4:28).

We should not use our God-given intelligence to think up ways of cheating or defrauding others. For example, Luther’s mentions shoddy merchandise and crooked deals in his explanation in the *Small Catechism*. But the proverb says: **“Dishonest scales are an abomination to the LORD, but a just weight is His delight”** (Proverbs 11:1). Elisha’s servant Gehazi tried to get rich through trickery and deceit, taking advantage of Naaman’s good will after he had been cured of leprosy. But the prophet Elisha became aware of what his servant had done, and he said to him: **“Is it time to receive money and to receive clothing, olive groves and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male and female servants? Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and your descendants forever”** (2 Kings 5:26-27). The world may admire clever business practices that take advantages over others, but no one can fool the Lord.

Another form of stealing is the refusal to pay back debts. It is written: **“The wicked borrows and does not repay, but the righteous shows mercy and gives”** (Psalm 37:21). Also charging an excessive rate of interest on a loan (which is usury) is condemned by God’s Word. **“One who increases his possessions by usury and extortion gathers it for him who will pity the poor”** (Proverbs 28:8).

Employers steal from their employees when they fail to pay their workers a fair wage for their work. The prophet Jeremiah says: **“Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness and his chambers by injustice, who uses his neighbor’s service without wages and gives him nothing for his work”** (Jeremiah 22:13). On the other hand, employees steal from their employers when they loaf about (are lazy) on the job and fail to do a proper day’s work. **“He who is slothful in his work is a brother to him who is a great destroyer”** (Proverbs 18:9).

Gambling may be legal in many places, but it involves trying to get what belongs to our neighbor, without regard for his well-being, whereas God says: **“Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being”** (1 Corinthians 10:24). Besides, proper stewardship of what God has given us prevents us from wasting our goods and throwing our money away on gambling.

The root cause of almost every kind of stealing is greed, covetousness, or discontent. Think of the trouble that was brought on the people of Israel when a single man, Achan, transgressed God’s clear command. In his own words, he admitted that his disobedience was triggered by his greed. He confessed: **“I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I have done: When I saw among the spoils a beautiful Babylonian garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them”** (Joshua 7:20-21). In a similar way King Ahab’s greed for Naboth’s vineyard led to lying, murder, and the taking of the vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-16).

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: **“Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows”** (1 Timothy 6:9-10). Notice that it is not the possession of money that is a sin, but **“the love of money”**, and this can be a problem not only for the rich but also for the poor.

Jesus has given us this warning in His parable of the sower and his seed. He said: **“The ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity”** (Luke 8:14). The apostle Paul told Timothy: **“Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share”** (1 Timothy 6:17-18). It is written: **“Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have”** (Hebrews 13:5).

We need to remember that stealing is often perpetrated by leading citizens with good reputations. Martin Luther said in his *Large Catechism*: **“If we look at the whole world in all its situations, it is nothing but a big, wide stable full of great thieves. This is why these people are also called armchair bandits and highway robbers. Far from being picklocks and sneak thieves who pilfer the cash box, they sit in their chairs and are known as great lords and honorable, upstanding citizens, while they rob and steal under the cloak of legality”** (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 417). Jesus accused some of the Pharisees of such behavior: **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation”** (Matthew 23:14).

Surely our examination of the Seventh Commandment in the light of God’s Word reveals that we have sinned against this commandment, just as we have sinned against all the other commandments, and therefore deserve temporal and eternal punishment. If we are inclined to excuse or defend ourselves,

it is good to hear once more God's verdict on all of us: "**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**" (Romans 3:23). "**For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all**" (James 2:10).

Our only hope for salvation is Jesus Christ, who alone kept the Seventh Commandment perfectly. We are saved by His perfect obedience in our place, and by His taking the punishment for our disobedience in our place, when He suffered and died on the cross. When the Holy Spirit brings us to faith in Christ, He also creates in us the new man, which is in perfect agreement with the Seventh Commandment. By faith in Christ we can begin to keep the Seventh Commandment, but because of our sinful flesh it is only a weak beginning. But in the hereafter we shall be perfectly content and satisfied in every way.

### **Questions**

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1. Give some examples of how civil law in the Old Testament punished thieves.
2. Why must we consider the Seventh Commandment part of God's moral law?
3. Why should we consider ourselves stewards, rather than owners?
4. What are some of the ways in which God gives us property and money?
5. What are four God-pleasing ways in which we can use our property?
6. What are some of the attitudes God wants us to have about our goods?
7. What is the chief way in which most people gain what they have?
8. List some of the ways in which people sin against this commandment.
9. Which ways of stealing are most prevalent in your locale?
10. What is the root cause of most kinds of stealing?
11. What did Luther mean when he spoke of armchair bandits?
12. What must be our confession after studying the Seventh Commandment?
13. What is our only hope for forgiveness and eternal life?
14. Why should we make an effort to be good stewards?



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

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.4.3.8 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### The Moral Law: The Eighth Commandment

After protecting our lives, our marriages, and our property in the previous commandments, in the Eighth Commandment God protects our good name and reputation and that of our neighbor. This is what God said on Mt. Sinai, and Moses repeated this commandment later in the same words: **You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor** (Exodus 20:16, Deuteronomy 5:20).

It may seem that our reputation is not as important as the other things God protects, but that is not so, for it is written: **A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches** (Proverbs 22:1), and: **A good name is better than precious ointment** (Ecclesiastes 7:1). False witness in court or plain lying or even telling the truth about someone in order to hurt them – all of these things contribute to the destruction of a person's good name and reputation and are forbidden by this commandment.

We know the Eighth Commandment is part of God's moral law for us today because it is repeated in the New Testament. Jesus said: **Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies** (Matthew 15:19). So also the apostle Paul made it very clear that false witness or lying is a product of the old man, not the new man of the Spirit. He says: **Therefore, putting away lying, 'let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,' for we are members of one another** (Ephesians 4:25). The quotation is from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, who wrote: **Speak each man the truth to his neighbor; give judgment in your gates for truth, justice, and peace** (Zechariah 8:16). To the Colossians Paul wrote: **Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him** (Colossians 3:9-10).

Martin Luther explained the Eighth Commandment like this in his *Small Catechism* (the *Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 353):

#### The Eighth Commandment

You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray, or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.

A person's reputation is injured by false witness or any other unrighteousness in court, such as bribery, obstruction of justice, prejudice, and respect of persons (favoritism), whether committed by witnesses, jurors, judges, or attorneys. Old Testament law provides a few examples. **You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness. You shall not follow a crowd to do evil; you shall not testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after many to pervert justice. You shall not show partiality to a poor man in his dispute. ... You shall not pervert the judgment of your poor in his dispute. Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill the innocent and righteous. For I will not justify the wicked. And you shall take no bribe; for a bribe blinds the discerning and perverts the words of the righteous** (Exodus 23:1-8).

When King Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard, Queen Jezebel instructed the leaders of Naboth's town to find two "scoundrels" to testify against him. They followed her orders, "**the scoundrels witnessed against him, against Naboth, in the presence of the people,**" and the end result was that "**they took him outside the city and stoned him with stones, so that he died**" (1 Kings 21:9-13).

A similar thing took place at Jesus' trial. "**The chief priests, the elders, and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death**" (Matthew 26:59). When the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were unable to resist the testimony of Stephen concerning Jesus, "**they secretly induced men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God'**" (Acts 6:11). The end result was the same: They "**cast him out of the city and stoned him**" (Acts 7:58). But the final verdict will be God's. He says: "**A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who speaks lies will not escape**" (Proverbs 19:5). "**A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who speaks lies shall perish**" (Proverbs 19:9).

False testimony in court is called perjury. When God's name is used in false testimony, the Second Commandment is also transgressed. But other lies are also against the will of God. Potiphar's wife sinned against her husband, against Joseph, and against God when she claimed that Joseph tried to seduce her, when the opposite was actually the case (Genesis 39:7-20). Gehazi, Elisha's servant, gave Naaman the wrong impression of Elisha by the lies that he spoke (2 Kings 5:20-27).

A person's name can be ruined through a betrayal of secrets by a supposed friend or friends. We call it gossip when one person goes around speaking hurtful things about another. The Old Testament law stated: "**You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people**" (Leviticus 19:16). "**A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter**" (Proverbs 11:13). Samson's secret was that he was a Nazirite to the Lord, and a Nazirite was not permitted to cut his hair. The Philistine woman whom Samson loved was Delilah. But she treacherously revealed Samson's secret to his enemies, and this not only ruined his reputation but destroyed his life (Judges 16:15-30).

One of Jesus' own disciples, Judas Iscariot, betrayed Him to His enemies and revealed Jesus' hiding place. Judas told the truth about Jesus, but he told it in order to harm Him, and he died as a traitor (Matthew 26:47-49). Anything we say that defames our neighbor is a sin, whether what we say is an outright lie, a half-truth, an insinuation, or even the total truth, if our intention is to hurt him. David's son Absalom twisted the truth about his father in order to gain a following for himself and take away the kingdom from his father (2 Samuel 15:1-6).

The psalmist Asaph testified against such evil speaking: "**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. ... I will rebuke you**" (Psalm 50:19-21). James, the brother of our Lord, wrote: "**Do not speak evil of one another, brethren**" (James 4:11). God judges the words that come from our mouths not only based on whether or not they are true, but also based on the intentions of our hearts in speaking them. Even when we think we are helping our neighbor, we may not be aware of our real intentions. The prophet Jeremiah wrote: "**The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind**" (Jeremiah 17:9-10).

The father of lies is the devil himself. He lied to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Jesus therefore said: "**The devil ... does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it**" (John 8:44). David was possibly speaking about his traitorous adviser Ahithophel when he said: "**The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords**" (Psalm 55:21). As David had his Ahithophel, so Jesus had His Judas Iscariot. How smooth Judas' words were about helping the poor, when in reality he was thinking about gaining more money for himself (John 12:4-6)! Herod the Great used smooth words when he asked the Wise Men to let him know about the new-born King of the Jews. He said he wanted to worship this King, but really he wanted to kill Him (Matthew 2:7-8, 16). The Pharisees used smooth words in their efforts to trap Jesus into sinning in His words (Matthew 22:15-18). It is wise not to be influenced by flattery.

The tongue is a very small member of the body, but it can do much damage. Words that escape from our mouths can never be put back in. Therefore the wise Solomon wrote: **“Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few. ... A fool’s voice is known by his many words”** (Ecclesiastes 5:2-3). It was James in particular who directed his attention to the sins of the tongue. He said: **“The tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! ... No man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison”** (James 3:5-8). Martin Luther had this to say about gossip in his *Large Catechism*: *“Learning a bit of gossip about someone else, they spread it into every corner, relishing and delighting in the chance to stir up someone else’s dirt like pigs that roll in manure and root around in it with their snouts”* (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 422).

Proverbs teaches us that God hates the lying tongue: **“These six things the LORD hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: A proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren”** (Proverbs 6:16-19).

We should not delight in the evils that befall others. Proverbs says: **“Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles”** (Proverbs 24:17). The sin of false witness begins, as all other sins, in the heart. Thus, even to think evil concerning our brother is already a sin. It is written: **“Let none of you think evil in your heart against your neighbor”** (Zechariah 8:17).

There is something we can do in love when we become aware that our neighbor is in danger of losing his faith in Christ through continued sin. We should not ignore our neighbor’s sin, for that will not help them fight against it. The book of Leviticus says: **“You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him”** (Leviticus 19:17). If we are not willing to talk to them about their sin, we should not dare to talk to anyone else about their sin, that is, we should not gossip about them. Our Lord Jesus has told us what we should do. **“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”** (Matthew 18:15-18). It is very difficult to talk to someone else about his sin. Pray for the right words. **“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver. Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold is a wise rebuker to an obedient ear”** (Proverbs 25:11-12).

In cases of public or open sin, it is not always necessary to talk to the sinner in private. It may be necessary at times to rebuke the person publicly. For example, John the Baptist spoke openly about the adultery of Herod Antipas, since he had openly stolen his brother’s wife (Luke 3:19). There was a time when the apostle Paul publicly rebuked Peter for what he was doing in public. Paul wrote to the Galatians: **“When Peter had come to Antioch, I withheld him to his face, because he was to be blamed. ... When I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all”** (Galatians 2:11-14). Paul wrote to Timothy: **“Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear”** (1 Timothy 5:20). Paul openly testified against false teachers, writing to Timothy: **“Their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth”** (2 Timothy 2:17-18).

Not all uses of the tongue regarding the neighbor are sinful. Luther’s *Small Catechism* mentions these three right uses of our tongues: *“We are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light”* (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 353). The proverb says: **“Open your mouth for the speechless, in the cause of all who are appointed to die. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy”** (Proverbs 31:8-9).

We should defend our neighbors against false accusations, especially those who have no one else to speak in their behalf. When Jesus' disciples found fault with Martha's sister Mary for anointing Jesus' body with precious perfume, Jesus defended her: "**Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a good work for Me. ... For in pouring this fragrant oil on My body, she did it for My burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her**" (Matthew 26:10-13). When King Saul accused David falsely, Saul's son Jonathan spoke well of him and saved David's life. It is written: "**Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father, and said to him, 'Let not the king sin against his servant, against David, because he has not sinned against you. ... Why then will you sin against innocent blood, to kill David without a cause? So Saul heeded the voice of Jonathan, and Saul swore, 'As the LORD lives, he shall not be killed'**" (1 Samuel 19:4-6).

Love for our neighbor will lead us to do what the apostle Paul says: "**Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers**" (Ephesians 4:29). We should build up our neighbor's name and reputation rather than tear it down. Peter wrote: "**Above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins**" (1 Peter 4:8).

When the high priest Eli saw the godly woman Hannah praying silently with great anguish of heart, he did not interpret what she was doing in the best possible light. Rather he put the worst construction on her actions, saying to her: "**How long will you be drunk? Put your wine away from you!**" (1 Samuel 1:14). But we should not jump to the worst possible conclusions. That is not what love does. What does love do? "**Love does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things**" (1 Corinthians 13:5-7).

Have any of us obeyed the Eighth Commandment and used our tongues without sin every moment of our lives? Of course not. James wrote: "**If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. ... But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison**" (James 3:2-8). There are no such perfect man or woman among us. It is easy for us to find fault with others and point out their sins to them and to the world. But every time we accuse someone else, we are accusing ourselves, for we are guilty of the same sins as they. The apostle Paul says: "**You are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. ... And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?**" (Romans 2:1-3). "**There is none who does good, no, not one. Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness**" (Romans 3:12-14).

It should be clear to us all that we have sinned against the Eighth Commandment and therefore deserve temporal and eternal punishment. Our only hope is Jesus Christ, who did keep this commandment perfectly in our behalf. He Himself said: "**For this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth**" (John 18:37). He always spoke the truth with love in His heart in all of the many situations in which He was placed. He was able to challenge His enemies with the question: "**Which of you convicts Me of sin?**" (John 8:46).

Only Jesus has kept this commandment perfectly, even as He has kept all the commandments perfectly. We are saved by His perfect life of obedience as well as by His being punished for our disobedience when He suffered and died on the cross. Only by faith in Him and love for Him can we even begin keeping this commandment. The apostle Paul encourages us with these words: "**I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, ... that we, ... speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ**" (Ephesians 4:1, 15).

## Questions

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1. What is God protecting by means of the Eighth Commandment?
2. How do we know that the Eighth Commandment is part of God's moral law?
3. In what ways do people sin when they are involved in a court of law?
4. What happened at the trials of Naboth, Stephen, and Jesus?
5. What is a talebearer? Give some examples.
6. In what way were Ahithophel and Judas Iscariot similar to each other?
7. With what other small things does James compare the tongue? (James 3)
8. What should we not do when we become aware of someone else's sin?
9. What should we do when we become aware of someone else's sin?
10. When is it proper to reprove someone in public, rather than in private?
11. What is the proper use of our tongues? Give some examples.
12. What kind of persons are able to use their tongues properly always?
13. Name any persons you know who always use their tongues in love.
14. What is the only way you and I can be saved from eternal punishment?

**A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)**

**Lesson 18.4.3.9 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel**

**The Moral Law: The Ninth and Tenth Commandments**

When God spoke the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai, He concluded with two similar commandments that many consider to be one commandment. Of all the commandments, the ninth and tenth commandments condemn us most deeply because they show that it is not only the outward actions but the thoughts and intents of the heart that are sin. These commandments go beyond any human commandments, for they speak of the sins of our thoughts and inmost desires. God said from Mt. Sinai: **“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s”** (Exodus 20:17). When Moses repeated God’s commandments as the Israelites were about to cross the Jordan River and enter Canaan, he reversed the order of these two commandments. He said: **“You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife; and you shall not desire your neighbor’s house, his field, his male servant, his female servant, his ox, his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s”** (Deuteronomy 5:21). Moses then continued: **“These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly, in the mountain from the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and He added no more. And He wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me”** (Deuteronomy 5:22).

We shall consider these two commandments together because they deal with the same sin, the sin of coveting or sinful desiring. In the New Testament Paul simply speaks of one commandment: **“You shall not covet”** (Romans 13:9). This commandment is certainly part of God’s moral law because it is repeated in the New Testament. Jesus said: **“Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses”** (Luke 12:15). He also said: **“What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man”** (Mark 7:20-23).

The apostle Paul warned the Christians in Corinth: **“Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God”** (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). When a member was excommunicated as an impenitent sinner, Paul gave these instructions: **“I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person”** (1 Corinthians 5:11). Such persons were not to think that they could call themselves Christians and still live openly unchristian lives.

It is true that not all desire is sinful. The apostle Paul uses the word “desire” in a good sense also. He says, for example: **“Earnestly desire the best gifts”** when he is speaking of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:31). He says: **“Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts”** (1 Corinthians 14:1). One such gift they should desire is the gift of prophecy. **“Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy”** (1 Corinthians 14:39). Paul wrote to Timothy: **“If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work”** (1 Timothy 3:1). It is good for Christians to desire a position or an office in which they can serve the Lord and His Church.

Thus, the Ninth and Tenth Commandments do not forbid all desiring, but they forbid sinful desiring – desiring something forbidden by God or desiring something that is not wrong in itself, but desiring it with an excessive desire that becomes idolatry because it replaces God as that which is supremely important.

Martin Luther explained these commandments in this way in his *Small Catechism (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, pp. 353-354)*:

#### The Ninth Commandment

You are not to covet your neighbor's house.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not try to trick our neighbors out of their inheritance or property or try to get it for ourselves by claiming to have a legal right to it and the like, but instead be of help and service to them in keeping what is theirs.

#### The Tenth Commandment

You are not to covet your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, cattle, or whatever is his.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not entice, force, or steal away from our neighbors their spouses, household workers, or livestock, but instead urge them to stay and fulfill their responsibilities to our neighbors.

The Old Testament provides some examples of sinful desiring. When the Israelites captured the city of Jericho, God warned them before the battle that all the goods of the city were to belong to the Lord, and that none of them should take anything in the city for themselves. But a man named Achan disobeyed this command and finally confessed his sin to Joshua: **"I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I have done: When I saw among the spoils a beautiful Babylonian garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. And there they are, hidden in the earth in the midst of my tent, with the silver under it"** (Joshua 7:20-21). The sin of theft and outright disobedience to God's command began with the sin of coveting.

When King David stayed home from battle and was walking on the roof of his house, **"he saw a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful to behold."** After learning that she was the wife of Uzziah, one of his soldiers, he should have thought about the commandment against coveting his neighbor's wife. But at that point in time his desire for the woman was greater than his love for the Lord, and so he **"took her; and she came to him, and he lay with her"** (2 Samuel 11:2-4). The sin of coveting in this case led to stealing, deceit, and finally even murder. But the coveting itself was already a sin.

Then there was King Ahab of Israel, who wanted Naboth, his neighbor, to sell him his vineyard. This desire to buy his neighbor's vineyard was not a sin in itself, but when Naboth refused to sell it, **"Ahab went into his house sullen and displeased. ... And he lay down on his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no food"** (1 Kings 21:1-4). Ahab's desire for that vineyard was becoming idolatry, loving something more than God, and so he did not object when his wife Jezebel wickedly schemed to get that vineyard for him. His sin of coveting led to false witness, murder, and theft.

In many cases those who are guilty of coveting are already rich in the goods of this world, but they are not satisfied. They want more. God's prophet Micah had this to say about such persons: **"They covet fields and take them by violence, also houses, and seize them. So they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance"** (Micah 2:2). They do not love their neighbors as themselves. They want to get rich at their neighbor's expense.

The Pharisees in Jesus' time liked to pretend they were holier than others. But Jesus knew their hearts, and He said to them: "**Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers**" (Matthew 23:14). The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: "**Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows**" (1 Timothy 6:9-10).

Notice that in the above passage the problem begins in the heart with desire, lusts, the love of money, and greed. These are things that cannot always be seen by human observers, but God knows the heart, and He can rightly punish sins of the heart, even though these sins are hidden to others. The Lord revealed to Ezekiel the hypocrisy of his listeners: "**They hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain**" (Ezekiel 33:31).

The same thing was true of the Pharisees, for when Jesus said to them: "**You cannot serve God and mammon. The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him. And He said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God'**" (Luke 16:13-15).

God's commandment against coveting shows us that God is concerned not only with sinful words and deeds but also sinful thoughts. Sinful thoughts are the roots and causes of all other sins. James says: "**Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death**" (James 1:14-15).

Where does murder begin? The root of murder is hatred in the heart. The apostle John wrote: "**We should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous. ... He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him**" (1 John 3:11-15).

Where does adultery begin? The root of adultery is lust in the heart. Jesus said: "**I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart**" (Matthew 5:28).

Where does theft begin? The root of theft is greed in the heart. "**Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare. ... The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil**" (1 Timothy 6:9-10).

Where does false witness begin? The root of false witness is malice in the heart. The prophet Zechariah wrote: "**Let none of you think evil in your heart against your neighbor**" (Zechariah 8:17).

Although natural man has the law of God written in his heart, he still has a hard time believing that God hates even his sinful thoughts when he does not act on them. When he was a Pharisee the apostle Paul did not want to think of sinful desires as sinful, but God's commandment convinced him otherwise. He confessed about himself: "**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). For this very reason God concluded His address from Mt. Sinai with this commandment. God wanted His people to know that God's law demands of us absolute perfection and purity in thought, word, and deed. God's standard is thus much, much higher than most people realize.

God's standard for us is His own holiness. "**You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy**" (Leviticus 19:2). Jesus told His disciples: "**You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect**" (Matthew 5:48). Perfection equals perfect love for God and neighbor. The apostle Paul said: "**Love is the fulfillment of the law**" (Romans 13:10). The love and holiness of God is shown to us in the thoughts, words, and deeds of our Lord Jesus. Paul therefore says: "**Let this mind be in you which was**

**also in Christ Jesus”** (Philippians 2:5). For this reason, it is important for us to struggle against the evil thoughts that enter our minds. Peter says: **“Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul”** (1 Peter 2:11).

Martin Luther therefore wrote in his *Large Catechism* explanation of the commandment against coveting: *“Above all, He wants the heart to be pure, even though, as long as we live here, we cannot accomplish that. So this commandment remains, like all the rest, one that constantly accuses us and shows just how upright we really are in God’s sight”* (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 427). In other words, we are not upright at all.

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments require of us a God-centered attitude with respect to the things of this world. God wants us to be perfectly satisfied and content with what He has given us: our spouse, servants, property, cattle, etc. Dissatisfaction, discontent, and envy of others are in essence identical with coveting. We need to realize that elements of the media and other human organizations thrive on creating human discontent. But as God’s children we are not to let our hearts be captured by worldly dissatisfaction, like the Israelites on their wilderness journey, who were always grumbling and complaining about how God was treating them.

There are two psalms that warn us against envy when we see others having it so much better in this world than ourselves. David says in Psalm 37: **“Do not fret because of evildoers, nor be envious of the workers of iniquity. ... Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in the way. ... A little that a righteous man has is better than the riches of many wicked. ... I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread”** (Psalm 37:1, 7, 16, 25). Asaph admitted that he was envious, saying in Psalm 73: **“I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ... When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me – until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end”** (Psalm 73:3, 16-17). In other words, God’s judgment is awaiting all the wicked at the end, for God is a just God.

As believers in Christ we have the assurance of eternal life through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Therefore we should be fully satisfied and content with whatever our loving God has given us in this life. The apostle Paul wrote: **“I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound”** (Philippians 4:11-12). He told Timothy: **“Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content”** (1 Timothy 6:6-8). It is written: **“Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’”** (Hebrews 13:5).

Consider these examples of believers in Christ who have kept the commandment not to covet: Abraham gave his nephew Lot the first choice in choosing pastureland for his flocks and herds. Later, after he had rescued Lot and others from their enemies, he refused to take for himself any of the spoils of the victory, saying to the king of Sodom: **“I will take nothing, from a thread to a sandal strap, and ... I will not take anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich’”** (Genesis 14:23). Joseph was satisfied with his lot as Potiphar’s trusted slave and did not take advantage of the opportunity provided by Potiphar’s wife to have her as his lover (Genesis 39). When Paul was a prisoner, he met Onesimus, a runaway slave, and brought him to Christ. Onesimus then proved to be his faithful servant. But as soon as he had opportunity, he sent Onesimus back to his master, Philemon, not wanting to deprive Philemon of the service of his slave (Philemon).

Not even Abraham, Joseph, or the apostle Paul could say that they had kept the Ninth and Tenth Commandments perfectly, however. The Bible reminds us again and again that we have all sinned against all of the commandments by thought, word, and deed. Only our Lord Jesus kept these commandments perfectly. We are saved alone by His obedience, for His obedience even to the point of death covers all of our disobedient deeds, words, thoughts, and desires. **“For as by one man’s**

**disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous. Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Romans 5:19-20). We are saved alone through trust in Him who lived, died, and rose again for us.**

Only by faith in Jesus can we begin to keep these commandments against coveting, but every moment we again need Christ's forgiveness for our continued failures to keep our thoughts clean and pure. "**He is pure**" and only He (1 John 3:3). "**In Him there is no sin**" (1 John 3:5). Peter encourages us: "**Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever**" (1 Peter 1:22-23).

### **Questions**

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1. What does God forbid in the Ninth and Tenth Commandments?
2. Why can we be sure that these commandments are part of God's moral law?
3. What are some of the things that are good for us to "covet"?
4. How did Achan, David, and Ahab sin against these commandments?
5. How did the Pharisees try to cover up their greed?
6. Why is it difficult for people to think of coveting as a sin?
7. Where do the sins of murder, adultery, theft, and false witness begin?
8. How high is God's standard in His law?
9. What do Psalms 37 and 73 teach us about envy?
10. Why can Christians be content with what they have?
11. Why can we not be saved by the Ninth and Tenth Commandments?
12. Who has obeyed the Ninth and Tenth Commandments perfectly?
13. What is our only hope for salvation?



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**

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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?



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

## 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**

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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?



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

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.4.3.12.1 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### God's Law as a Curb to Check to Some Extent the Coarse Outbreak of Sin

Now that we have studied God's moral law in detail, it remains for us to consider why God has given us this moral law. What is the purpose of the law? As we study God's Word, it becomes clear that there are several different purposes for God's law. Our Lutheran confessions mention, in particular, three uses (or functions) of God's moral law. The first use of the law is as a curb to check (that is, prevent) to some extent the coarse outbreak of sin. The second use of the law, which is its most important function, is as a mirror to show us our sins and sinfulness. The third use of the law is as a fixed standard to teach us which works are pleasing to God.

The first two uses are intended for all human beings, unbelievers as well as believers in Christ. The third use applies only to Christians. It is important to remember that believers in Christ have both the old man (the sinful flesh) in them as well as the new man (the spirit) created by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. If Christians did not have the sinful flesh, they would not need the law in any of its uses; out of perfect faith and love toward God they would fulfill the requirements of the law without even knowing it, for the new man is in perfect harmony with the Holy Spirit and therefore does God's will. But because Christians still have the sinful flesh in them throughout their earthly life, they need the law in all of its uses. They need the law to curb their flesh. They need the law to remind them that they are sinners who deserve punishment. They need the law to inform them as to what is right and what is wrong, because the flesh can mislead them into thinking evil is good and good is evil.

The struggle between flesh and spirit is described in both Romans 7 and Galatians 5 and is summarized in the following passages. **"The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish"** (Galatians 5:17). **"With the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin"** (Romans 7:25).

So let us consider the first use of the law, its use as a curb. On many city streets in the United States and perhaps in other countries a curb is placed on both sides of the road. This curb is a sudden rise in elevation, made of something hard like concrete. The curb serves the purpose of letting drivers know they are going off the road if they hit the curb; the curb may also prevent them from going over the curb if they are not driving too fast. But the curb does not keep them on the road as a wall would; if they are going fast enough, they will jump the curb and go off the road.

The law as a curb cannot keep anyone on the perfect road of obedience, but it can check to some extent the coarse outbreak of such sins as murder, adultery, or theft. The law checks such sins by its threats of punishment or by the shame or guilt that may result from that sin. God uses human government as its agent to make civil law and administer punishments for disobedience. Through the ages most human governments have agreed with God's laws to some extent, and have condemned such sins as murder, assault, adultery, robbery, theft, slander, perjury. If there were no laws and no punishments for crimes against the laws, this world would be in a state of anarchy without law or order.

When God gave the Ten Commandments to His people and the people were frightened by the voice of God, Moses said to them: **"God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin"** (Exodus 20:20). Surely God's threats of punishment keep some sinners from

committing the worst crimes and offenses, even as strict enforcement of the law by the government can be a deterrent to some of the most heinous crimes. The laws and punishments God prescribed in the Old Testament had the purpose and the effect of deterrence. For example, if someone among the people suggested the worship of another god or idol, he was to be swiftly punished by stoning. Moses told the people: **“All Israel shall hear and fear, and not again do such wickedness as this among you”** (Deuteronomy 13:11).

So God uses His law in this world as a curb to uphold decency and order. The civil government, whatever its form, is God’s minister (or agent) for the punishment of evildoers and the protection of those who follow the law. God Himself uses the law as a curb when He blesses the outwardly obedient with temporal blessings and punishes the disobedient with earthly judgments in order to check the grossest outbursts of wickedness. The apostle Paul taught this clearly when he wrote: **“He (the governing authority) is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil”** (Romans 13:4).

The law-abiding citizen does not have to fear the governing authorities and law enforcement. Paul states it as a general rule: **“The law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners”** (1 Timothy 1:9). It is only because the Christian still has a sinful flesh that they also still need the law as a curb to keep their own flesh in check. Unbelievers need the law because they are only sinful flesh and need to be restrained by law and the enforcement of law.

For this very reason our Lord wants us to pray **“for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence”** (1 Timothy 2:2). Good government is an aid to the proclamation of the Gospel and the living of a godly life in keeping with the Gospel.

Because the moral law is written in the hearts of all men, the concept of law and punishment is not foreign to the peoples on earth. No doubt every culture has found it necessary to establish certain rules and regulations for the control of human violence. This law of God, written in men’s hearts, also serves as a deterrent to crime. All human beings have a conscience, that is, a consciousness of a divine being that will punish them for their crimes. It is written: **“The LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God”** (Deuteronomy 4:24). Sinners try to escape from God like Adam and Eve, but they cannot, no matter how hard they try. Sometimes atheists who claim that there is no God are still afraid they might have to face God, and therefore they try as hard as they can to convince themselves that there is no God. That may be the reason why evolution is so popular among the educated people in this world. But the apostle Paul wrote: **“The Gentiles show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them”** (Romans 2:15). The unbelieving heathen **“know the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death”** (Romans 1:32). That is the reason that people all over the world are afraid of death and dying.

Because of his sinful flesh, the Christian also says with the psalmist: **“My flesh trembles for fear of You, and I am afraid of Your judgments”** (Psalm 119:120). Only Christ and His Gospel can take away such fears; only in Christ can we conquer the fear of death and the fear of the hereafter.

Our Lutheran confession summarizes this first use of the law in these words: *“The law has been given to people for three reasons: first, that through it external discipline may be maintained against the unruly and the disobedient”* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 502).

## Questions

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1. What are the three uses of the law?
2. What is meant by the use of the law as a curb?
3. Why do we say that the law can check sin but not prevent it totally?
4. Why does a Christian still need the law as a curb?
5. What agency does God use as His servant to apply the law as a curb?
6. Why can we be sure that law and its enforcement helps to deter crime?
7. For what reason does God want us Christians to pray for government?



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**

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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.



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-

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 that 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

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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?



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.6 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### The Gospel

The apostle Paul taught that God's law was a glorious light. But he also taught that the Gospel of Christ is a much more glorious light. **"If the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory"** (2 Corinthians 3:9). The law's work is negative; **"the letter kills"** (2 Corinthians 3:6). The law is bad news for every sinner, for the law curses and condemns every one of us. But the Gospel is good news, and in fact that is what the word "Gospel" means: good news. The good news is that **"where sin abounded, grace abounded much more"** (Romans 5:20).

In the Greek language the word for Gospel is *euangelion* εὐαγγέλιον, from which the English language derives the word "evangel" and "evangelical" and "evangelism". Very often the Lutheran church is called the Evangelical Lutheran church, because the Lutheran confessions emphasize the Gospel (the Good News) of Jesus Christ as the central core of everything that Lutherans teach and practice. The first two sentences of the *CLC Statement of Faith and Purpose* declare: "It is our single purpose to be a Christian church that proclaims the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible. This Gospel is the only way people can know the true God and the way to eternal life" (*CLC Statement of Faith and Purpose*, p. 5). This is in keeping with the message God gave the Bethlehem shepherds when Jesus was born: **"I bring you good tidings (Good News: the Gospel) of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord"** (Luke 2:10-11). After Jesus completed His work of saving the world by His death and resurrection, He told His followers: **"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature"** (Mark 16:15).

There are a few Bible passages where the word "Gospel" may be used in a broader sense to include all of God's Word, which would thus include the law. For example, Mark's Gospel begins with the words: **"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"** (Mark 1:1). The author may be referring everything that follows in the book that we call "The Gospel According to Mark", which contains much material that is not specifically good news. It contains the preaching of the law by John the Baptist and Jesus, as well as the good news of God's love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

But when we talk about law and Gospel and distinguish the law from the Gospel, then we mean the Gospel in its specific sense: the good news that God, out of free grace because of the work of Christ, forgives the sins of all sinners and pronounces the whole world righteous because of the work of Christ. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah is sometimes called the fifth evangelist (besides Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) because he preached in advance this Gospel of Christ as clearly as any of the apostles. For example: **"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things, who proclaims salvation. ... Break forth into joy, sing together, you waste places of Jerusalem! For the LORD has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD has made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God"** (Isaiah 52:7-10).

In the first sermon of the apostle Paul recorded in the book of Acts, Paul talks about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He then concludes with this Good News: **"Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses"** (Acts 13:38-39). The apostle Peter's sermon in the home of the Gentile Cornelius had a similar

conclusion: “**To Him (Jesus Christ) all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins**” (Acts 10:43). The apostle Paul called his life’s work “**the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus., to testify to the gospel of the grace of God**” (Acts 20:24).

In his letter to the Christians in Rome Paul talked about his intention to travel to Rome, saying: “**I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also, for I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith**” (Romans 1:15-17). As we have already seen, it is the Gospel of Christ that is God’s means of grace. The Gospel is not only the means to tell us that our sins are forgiven because of the work of Christ, but also the means to create faith in Christ in our hearts, so that we trust in Jesus, and in Jesus alone, for our salvation. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “**In Him (Christ) you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation**” (Ephesians 1:13). There can be no saving faith in Christ without “**the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation**”, for “**faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God**” (Romans 10:17).

One of our Lutheran confessions, the *Formula of Concord*, therefore defines the Gospel of Christ in this way: “*The gospel is, ... strictly speaking, nothing else than a proclamation of comfort and a joyous message which does not rebuke nor terrify but comforts consciences against the terror of the law, directs them solely to Christ’s merit, and lifts them up again through the delightful proclamation of the grace and favor of God, won through Christ’s merit*” (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 501).

## Questions

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1. What is the meaning of the word “gospel”?
2. In what way was the Gospel spoken when Jesus was born?
3. State the Gospel of Christ as best you can in one sentence.
4. What is the connection between the Gospel and the forgiveness of sins?
5. Why is the Gospel called the Gospel of grace?
6. What are the two functions of the Gospel as the means of grace?
7. What does God use to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ?



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.7 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### Differences between the Law and the Gospel

We have already shown that God's law is one thing, and God's Gospel is another thing. In this section we shall be pointing out the differences between the law and the Gospel in greater detail. The *Formula of Concord*, one of our Lutheran confessions, maintains that the distinction between the law and the Gospel is very important for understanding God's Word: "*We believe, teach, and confess that the distinction between law and gospel is to be preserved with great diligence in the church as an especially glorious light, through which the Word of God, in accord with Paul's admonition, is properly divided*" (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 500).

Difference Number One: The law tells us what to do. The Gospel tells us what God has done.

The Ten Commandments are a summary of God's law. Notice that each one of the Ten Commandments tells us that we are to do or not to do something. Positively, we are to remember the Sabbath day and to honor our parents. Negatively, we are not to have other gods, we are not to take God's name in vain, we are not to murder, commit adultery, steal bear false witness, or covet. Jesus summarized the law in two statements telling us what to do: "**You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself**" (Matthew 22:36-40). The apostle Paul summarized the law with one word: "**Love is the fulfillment of the law**" (Romans 13:10).

The Gospel, on the other hand, does not tell us what to do or not do, but it tells us what God has done. The good news brought to the Bethlehem shepherds was an announcement of what God had done: "**There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord**" (Luke 2:11). Jesus' words to the Pharisee Nicodemus give us a short summary of the Gospel. Notice that God is the One who has done something. "**God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life**" (John 3:16). The Bible is loaded with similar presentations of what God has done and is still doing for us sinners, beginning with the first Gospel promise in Genesis 3:15 to the last Gospel promise in Revelation 2:20: "**Surely I am coming quickly.**"

The law of God speaks of human works and achievements, but the Gospel speaks about grace and faith. Paul writes: "**We conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law**" (Romans 3:28). The law is a matter of wages and debt. The Gospel is a matter of gift and trust in that gift. "**To him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness**" (Romans 4:4-5).

There can be no such thing as salvation by a combination: partly by Gospel, partly by law. It is either-or, as it is written: "**If by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work**" (Romans 11:6). We cannot be saved partly by what we do, and partly by what God does for us. The apostle Paul at one point in his life tried to save himself by his own works. But after he learned to know the Gospel of grace, he said: "**Indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith**" (Philippians 3:8-9).

Difference Number Two: The law shows us our sin. The Gospel shows us our Savior from sin.

In his presentation of Christian doctrine to the Christians in Rome the apostle Paul stated the theme of his letter in Romans 1:16: **“I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation.”** The Gospel of Christ is the central message of Scripture; Paul’s main aim was to proclaim the salvation that is to be found in Christ Jesus. But notice that Paul then begins his presentation with a thorough discussion of the law, beginning in Romans 1:18 and continuing until Romans 3:20. In order to appreciate the salvation that Christ has won for us, we have to first of all understand very well what we needed to be saved from. That is the purpose of the law: to show us our sin.

Here are just a few quotations from Paul’s presentation of the law. Since God’s law has been written in man’s heart, human beings to some extent already know **“the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things (as listed in Romans 1:28-31) are deserving of death”** (Romans 1:32). But since we want to suppress that knowledge, God’s law reinforces it, reminding us that God is serious. **“Not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified”** (Romans 2:13). The law demands that we obey the law, or else there is punishment. Paul’s conclusion therefore is all-inclusive. **“We have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: ‘There is none righteous, no, not one’”** (Romans 3:9-10). **“Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin”** (Romans 3:19-20).

After thus demonstrating that God’s law shows us our sin, Paul then presents the Gospel, which shows us Jesus as our Savior from sin. **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 3:23-24). The Gospel is centered in Jesus Christ and His work. This was evident in the first Gospel promise in Genesis 3:15, which promised the coming of the woman’s Seed who would undo the damage brought into the world by Satan. The Seed would crush the head of the serpent. The angel of God told Joseph, Mary’s husband: **“She will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins”** (Matthew 1:21). How would He do it? Jesus Himself said: **“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”** (Matthew 20:28).

The Gospel of Jesus permeates every book of the Bible directly or indirectly. Peter said: **“To Him (Jesus) all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins”** (Acts 10:43). Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **“I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified”** (1 Corinthians 2:2). Paul wrote to Timothy: **“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief”** (1 Timothy 1:15). Any Bible passage that directs us to Jesus as our Savior is a Gospel passage.

God’s law makes demands, makes *conditional* promises, and threatens damnation to all transgressors. The Gospel, however, offers and promises life *unconditionally* as a free gift, to be received by faith. By a conditional promise we mean that God promises to give us life (eternal life) *if* we keep His commandments, as it is written in God’s law: **“You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them”** (Leviticus 18:5). If we do not keep His commandments, God threatens to curse us, as it is written: **“But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you”** (Deuteronomy 28:15).

The promises of the Gospel are not conditional but unconditional, as was the case already with the first Gospel promise in Genesis 3:15. God simply told Adam and Eve what He was going to do to save them. He did not tell them what they had to do to save themselves. Notice God’s unconditional Gospel as presented in Romans 3:24: **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 3:23-24). All are justified or declared righteous as a free gift of grace because of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. This is the Gospel that

shows us our Savior. Paul and Silas proclaimed this Gospel to the trembling jailer of Philippi, saying to him: **“Believe on (trust in, depend on, rely on) the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household”** (Acts 16:31).

By showing us our sin and cursing us for our disobedience, God’s law reveals our utter sinfulness and drives us to despair. The Gospel, on the other hand, declares us sinners righteous because of the work of Christ, and creates faith in God’s free gift of forgiveness of sins, and in this way creates new life in us. But if this Gospel gift is rejected, those who reject it forfeit its blessings and place themselves again under the law and its curse.

God’s law showed King David his sins and led him to say to God: **“Day and night Your hand was heavy upon me”** (Psalm 32:4). **“There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor any health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me”** (Psalm 38:3-4). When Peter showed the Jerusalem Jews their great sin in crucifying the Son of God, **“they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’”** (Acts 2:37).

After the law has done its work of showing us our sin and threatening us with eternal punishment, the Gospel of Christ comes to show us our Savior Jesus Christ and reveals all the blessings God wants to give us because of what Christ did for us by His life, death, and resurrection. Paul sums up law and Gospel very briefly in these words: **“The wages of sin is death (law), but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Gospel)”** (Romans 6:23).

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul plainly tells his readers that they were **“dead in trespasses and sins”** (Ephesians 2:1), but he also proclaims the Gospel: **“God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. ... By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast”** (Ephesians 2:4-9).

The Gospel of Christ can be rejected, but there is no other gospel. Therefore, those who reject the Gospel of Christ must face eternal punishment. Jesus Himself said: **“He who does not believe (the gospel) will be condemned”** (Mark 16:16). The letter to the Hebrews emphasizes this point: **“Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? ... It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”** (Hebrews 10:28-31).

It is sometimes stated that the law leads us to Christ or brings us to Christ. This is based on what Paul wrote in Galatians 3:24, which is translated: **“The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”** The words “to bring us” are not, however, in the original Greek language, and that is why in many English Bible editions these words are printed in *italics*. In a more literal translation, the passage would read: **“The law was our tutor until Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor”** (Galatians 3:24-25). What Paul is saying is that in the Old Testament God’s people were under a taskmaster and were treated like minor children who had to be restricted by the many laws God gave His people in the Old Testament. The word translated “tutor” was, according to Greek custom, a slave whose job it was to accompany a child on his way to and from school, so as to keep him out of danger and trouble. God’s law (ceremonial, civil, and moral) in the Old Testament restricted God’s people with many rules. But when Christ came and faith in Christ was the order of the day, the law was no longer needed as such a tutor. We, as grown-up children, are free from those many Old Testament restrictions. This is explained more fully in Galatians 4:1-4.

It is correct to say that God’s law shows us our need for a Savior from sin because it shows us our sin. But the law’s effect is only negative. It contributes nothing towards our salvation. It is the Gospel, and the Gospel alone, that shows us our Savior from sin.

Difference Number Three: The law should be preached to all, especially to impenitent sinners. The Gospel should be preached especially to troubled sinners. We shall discuss this difference in the next lesson: Applying the Law and the Gospel.

Difference Number Four: The law is written in man's heart. The Gospel is not by nature in man's heart but must be revealed to him by God through His Word.

The apostle Paul teaches us that every human being has a knowledge of God from an observation of the world God has created. **"What may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God"** (Romans 1:19-21). The problem is **"that they did not like to retain God in their knowledge"** (Romans 1:28). And yet they knew **"the righteous judgment of God"** (Romans 1:32). Without having God's written law, as the Jews had, the **"Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law"** (Romans 2:14). Why do they do the things in the law? Because they **"show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them"** (Romans 2:15).

Thus, when God's messengers preach God's law to the world as preparation for the Gospel, this is something that their hearers know something about from their own experience. They know that some things are right and other things are wrong. They have a feeling of guilt to some extent because of that law in their hearts, and thus they also have a fear of death, for they fear that they might have to face their Maker. But they do not understand the depth of their problem. That is why the law must be proclaimed to all, to reveal their sin in all its ugliness, **"so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful"** (Romans 7:13).

The Gospel of Christ, on the other hand, is not known to anyone unless God reveals it to them through His Word. Paul says: **"As it is written: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.' But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit"** (1 Corinthians 2:9-10). After their sin Adam and Eve would not have known anything about the promise of the Savior if God had not revealed it to them. Those who have not been exposed to the Gospel are, in Paul's words, **"without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world"** (Ephesians 2:12). They know nothing about the Gospel of Christ. They **"walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart"** (Ephesians 4:17-18). Although they have a limited knowledge of the law, they have no knowledge of the Gospel.

Even when the Gospel of Christ is proclaimed in the hearing of those who know nothing about Christ, they have no understanding of it. Paul wrote: **"We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness"** (1 Corinthians 1:23). Man's natural reaction to the Gospel of Christ is resistance and disbelief and even hostility to the messengers of the good news. It takes a special miracle of the Holy Spirit, working through the Gospel, to bring persons out of the darkness of disbelief into the light of the Gospel. Paul wrote: **"It is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"** (2 Corinthians 4:6). Just as God brought light to the dark world in the beginning by His Word, so God shines the light of the Gospel into the hearts of sinners and brings them to faith. **"No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit"** (1 Corinthians 12:3). The Holy Spirit uses the Gospel for this purpose, as it is written: **"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"** (Romans 10:17). For this very reason God wants the Gospel of Christ to be proclaimed all over the world.

Difference Number Five: The law cannot save anyone. The Gospel is God's power to save.

Two of the apostle Paul's letters take up this matter at some length: his letter to the Romans and his letter to the Galatians. In both of these letters Paul emphasizes the point that the law's failure to save anyone is not the fault of the law. He says: **"The commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good"** (Romans 7:10-12). In fact, Paul says: **"If there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law"** (Galatians 3:21).

In other words, there is no law better than God's law. God's law was perfectly able to provide life. The reason that it cannot save anyone is not the law's fault, but the fault of the person who is confronted by the law. Ever since Adam's fall into sin, there is no one who can possibly live up to the standards of God's law. If we could keep the law, we would be saved by our obedience. Then our righteousness would have come by means of the law and our obedience to it. But since we are sinners, we cannot obey the law, and therefore the law cannot save us. This is true of everyone, whether unbelievers, dead in sin, or reborn believers in Christ, like the apostle Paul, who confessed: **"I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells. ... With the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin"** (Romans 7:18, 25).

But this does not mean that we are without hope of being saved. Paul says: **"What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh"** (Romans 8:3). What God could not do through the law because of our sinful flesh, God accomplished in another way: He sent His Son into our world as a human being who looked like us sinners but without any sin of His own. Jesus did perfectly right what we do wrong. Jesus was punished for our sins on the cross and thus took away our sin and its punishment. He **"wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross"** (Colossians 2:14).

In his letters, the apostle Paul first points out that it is impossible for man by nature, and even for the Christian, to do what God's law demands, and then he presents Christ as God's solution to the problem of our sin and our inability to keep the law. He says: **"By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe"** (Romans 3:20-22). And again he says: **"A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh will be justified"** (Galatians 2:16).

Thus on the one hand, our God teaches us: **"As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse"** (Galatians 3:10) and: **"No one is justified by the law in the sight of God"** (Galatians 3:11). But on the other hand, He teaches us: **"Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us"** (Galatians 3:13). This is the saving Gospel, which Paul summarized in these words: **"Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and ... He was buried, and ... He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures"** (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). This is the Gospel of Christ, or the Good News, **"by which also you are saved"** (1 Corinthians 15:2). This is the Gospel as it was taught by Paul and all the other apostles. **"Whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed"** (1 Corinthians 15:11). Therefore Paul says: **"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).

Since God's law cannot save us, it is a horrible abuse of God's law to teach or to think that we can keep it and thus earn our salvation or any kind of favor from God.

Difference Number Six: The law demands absolute perfection. The Gospel gives perfection in Christ.

James, the brother of our Lord, confessed about himself and others: “**We all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body**” (James 3:2). But then James went on to say: “**No man can tame the tongue**” (James 3:8). Even in respect to just one small member of our body, the tongue, we are far from perfect. What grade does God demand from us in His law? The answer is clear: “**You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy**” (Leviticus 19:2). Jesus told His disciples: “**You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect**” (Matthew 5:48). God gives only two scores: 100% for perfection, and 0% to anything less than perfection. James says: “**Whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all**” (James 2:10). No one gets 100% from God according to His law.

What God demands in His law, He gives in His Gospel. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: “**I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. ... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed**” (Romans 1:16-17). The righteousness of God is perfection. And this is what God gives us through the Gospel. For it is written: “**But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus**” (Romans 3:21-24). The same ones who have sinned are now justified (declared righteous and perfect) because of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. God sees that all the sins of the world were punished when Jesus was punished in man’s place on the cross. God raised Him from the dead to show us all that the sins of the world that had been given to Jesus have now been removed and God therefore declares to all the world: You are righteous in Christ. You are justified in Christ. You are perfect in Christ.

“**As through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous**” (Romans 5:18-19). Adam’s sin led to condemnation for all his descendants. Christ’s obedience won for all sinners the perfect righteousness and justification by which we can stand before God as being without sin. God “**justifies the ungodly**” (Romans 4:5); God declares ungodly sinners righteous because of what Christ did in our behalf.

“**God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. ... For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him**” (2 Corinthians 5:19-21).

This righteousness that God won through the work of Christ for all sinners can be forfeited by us through unbelief. But the perfect righteousness won by Christ is there for all and it is proclaimed in the Gospel for anyone to grab hold of it and trust in it for salvation. When God forgives sin, He forgives all sin. When God gives us righteousness in Christ, He gives us perfect righteousness, so that as believers in Christ we are “**a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but ... holy and without blemish**” (Ephesians 5:27).

Paul’s ultimate aim was to “**be found in Him (Christ), not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith**” (Philippians 3:9). Many of His fellow-Jews, however, were “**ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes**” (Romans 10:3-4). Since the Gospel gives us Christ, the Gospel gives us the perfect righteousness Christ won for us.

Difference Number Seven: The law provides no strength for the living of a godly life. Through the Gospel God gives us the strength and desire to will and to do His will.

God’s law can motivate improved external behavior by the promise of reward for obedience and the threat of punishment for disobedience. This is the way the law functions as a curb to keep the unruly

and rebellious in check. The government must use the law in this way to protect its citizens from criminals. But no kind of law, including God's own law, can change a man's heart or motivate him to do good out of love for God. This is something that only the Gospel can do. The apostle Paul stated this briefly in his words that we examined before: **"The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life"** (2 Corinthians 3:6).

The Gospel of God's grace and forgiveness in Christ sets us free from the coercion of the law, so that now out of love for God and gratitude for His forgiveness we willingly think, speak, and act according to God's will according to the new man created in us, although we are continually hindered by the old man that remains with us and in us. After being baptized into Christ's death for us, we begin to **"walk in newness of life"** (Romans 6:4). Paul reminds the Christians in Rome: **"God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness"** (Romans 6:17-18).

Being a slave of righteousness is not like being a slave of sin. Being a slave of righteousness means willing service to a God who has loved us and saved us from hell. It is written: **"We love Him because He first loved us"** (1 John 4:19). **"Now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life"** (Romans 6:22).

Again Paul says: **"Now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter"** (Romans 7:6). In his new man Paul says: **"I delight in the law of God according to the inward man"** (Romans 7:22). In other words, the new man in the Christian does not fight against what God wills, but is happy to do God's will, but in his new desire he is still held back to some extent by his sinful flesh.

Paul continues in chapter 8: **"The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit"** (Romans 8:2-4). Those who trust in Jesus Christ for salvation are enabled to trust in Him through the work of the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel, and they have the Holy Spirit working in them that enables them also to begin to live a Christian life. They become **"spiritually minded"** (Romans 8:6). **"By the Spirit"** they **"put to death the deeds of the body"** (Romans 8:13). They fight against sin, and the Spirit empowers them to win the battle time and time again, although there are continued setbacks because of the flesh.

The psalmist says: **"I will run the course of Your commandments, for You shall enlarge my heart"** (Psalm 119:32). God enlarges our hearts through the Gospel; that is, He fills us with love for Him by telling us what He has done in love for us. For this reason, we become eager to do what God wants, and we run to do what formerly the law could only get us to do by threat and punishment, and then only unwillingly and externally.

This therefore is the prayer of the author to the Hebrews: **"May the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen"** (Hebrews 13:20-21). Notice that the power for every truly good work comes from the Gospel of Jesus, who shed His blood for us and rose from the dead for the forgiveness of our sins.

We have considered in detail the many differences between the law and the Gospel as we find them in the Holy Scriptures. Sadly many so-called "Christian" teachers fail to understand these differences and therefore lead their followers astray. In fact, the Roman Catholic Church, the largest visible Christian denomination, has taught wrongly on this matter for hundreds of years. In response to Martin Luther's reintroduction of the true Bible teaching of salvation by grace alone, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent stated as their official teaching: **"If anyone says that a person who is justified and ever**

so much perfected is not bound to observe the commandments of God and of the church, but only to believe, as if the Gospel were indeed a bare and absolute promise of eternal life without the condition of keeping the commandments, let him be anathema" (Sixth Session, Canon 20).

This statement is in direct conflict with the Gospel of Christ, which teaches us, especially in Romans 3 and Galatians 3, that we are justified (declared righteous) and forgiven through the redemption of Christ, totally apart from the works of the law. The Roman Catholic teaching is that we are saved partly by faith in Christ and partly by obedience – obedience not only to the commandments of God but also to the commandments of the church. They teach salvation by faith plus works, not faith alone, whereas Scripture teaches salvation by faith alone. In fact, the Bible tells us in Galatians 5:4 that if we attempt to gain salvation by works, we have fallen from grace and lost Christ. That shows how bad the Roman Catholic false teaching is. They want the Law to help us along in our salvation, as if the Gospel is not sufficient to save us. And yet the Bible teaches that the Gospel is the power of God to salvation.

But many Protestants, including some Lutherans, also go astray by not proclaiming the Gospel of Christ faithfully. They spend much of their time and effort "moralizing", that is, they try to teach people to be good because God commands it, without using the power of the Gospel. They believe the main work of the church is to improve men's lives or to improve society. But telling people that they ought to improve their lives without bringing them the Gospel of Christ and the message of forgiveness in Christ is a useless endeavor. Such churches do not consider sin as the chief problem of mankind. These churches want to deal with poverty, malnutrition, lack of education, unemployment, and discrimination, which they consider to be the real problems in society, and they seek the solution to these problems in the law, rather than the Gospel.

But the fact is that real improvement in the world can come only when people know and believe in the Gospel of Christ and the Holy Spirit begins to work in them and through them. This cannot happen by passing laws and enforcing them. Improvement takes place only through the preaching of the Gospel and conversion to Christ one individual at a time. Improvement in the world may come about as a by-product of the faith of true Christians, who in faith show love to their neighbors. But even then, we cannot hope that this world will ever become a holy place. By faith in Christ, we look forward to a new heaven and earth where righteousness dwells, but this will come about only when Jesus returns and takes those who trust in Him to His everlasting home in heaven.

### **Questions**

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1. Prove that God's law tells us what to do.
2. Show that the Gospel tells us what God has done for us.
3. What is the theme of Paul's letter to the Romans?
4. Why do we need the law in order to appreciate the Gospel?
5. What is the difference between a conditional promise and an unconditional promise?
6. Why can the Gospel save us, but the law cannot save us?
7. Why must the Holy Spirit reveal the Gospel to us through words?
8. What is the only way in which the law could save someone?
9. In what way does the Gospel give us perfect righteousness?
10. How does God motivate us to do truly good works?
11. What kind of works can the law motivate us to do?
12. For what reason does a Christian want to do good works?
13. What is the difference between preaching the Gospel and moralizing?
14. What is so wrong about the quotation from the Council of Trent?



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

## 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**

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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?

