

So What?! *Does Luther's Theology Still Matter?*
Law & Gospel: *Its a Matter of Death and Life* Study Guide
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Overview

The distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the great inheritances of our Lutheran tradition. These terms have technical meanings different from (or broader than) their common or even churchly usage. "Law" in the technical Lutheran sense does not refer to legislation or biblical commandment, or at least not these things only. "Gospel" does not in this sense mean simply a collected story of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection. Instead, these terms describe the effect of the Word of God on the person who hears or reads it. Law and Gospel are two distinct ways of experiencing the Word of God. The Law is at work when you feel guilty, convicted, seen for what you are. The Gospel is at work when you are forgiven, comforted by God's promises, made alive.

It is important to recognize that the scriptures are not sortable into "Law" and "Gospel" buckets. A verse doesn't belong to one category or the other in a fixed way. For one person, a verse or story might bring comfort even as it distresses another, and the same verse might affect one person differently at different points in their life. Again, these terms have to do with the effect of the Word, not a passage's intrinsic substance. For example, the famous words from John 3:16 are often thought of as the definitive expression of the Gospel--"for God so loved the world," etc...--but this message is a powerful reminder that you are indeed a sinner in need of saving. That's the Law afflicting your conscience!

Finally, we must not fall into the trap of thinking of the Gospel as "good" and the Law as "bad." These two things function together for our benefit. Without the Law humbling me, what need have I for Jesus? I'm doing just fine on my own! And without the comfort of the Gospel, I would sink into despair. At a social level, communities that deemphasize the Gospel are prone to degrees of authoritarianism, and communities that deemphasize the Law can fall into faithless obsession with the self.

Key Passages:

"Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Matthew 19:24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25

"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"... Luke 10:25-28

Questions

1. Can you imagine how different audiences would experience the first key passage differently? It's easy to see how one could experience this verse as Law. It is frightening, and causes anxiety about the state of one's salvation. Will it be possible for me to enter the kingdom of God? How could this bring comfort and to whom?
2. The pulpit offers one of the most powerful and direct opportunities to experience Law and Gospel. Imagine the preacher's task with respect to Law and Gospel. Sometimes they might try to balance these two functions in a sermon; sometimes they might emphasize the Gospel since the Gospel alone can build faith, and our highest objective is to assist the Holy Spirit in that work. It is unusual for a preacher in the Lutheran tradition to preach a sermon too focused on the Law, but could you imagine a context in which that might be useful or appropriate?