

Law and Gospel (Romans 3:20-28)

- 1) God is just
- 2) God justifies those with faith

Do you like brain teasers or other games that work your mind? They say that if you want to diminish the effects of aging, it's good to do activities that force you to think in new ways. I don't know if you already do things like these, but this morning I'm about to do you a favor. I'm going to read two statements that seem to contradict each other. But I want you to see how it is they work together. Here are the two statements. First, **"A Christian [person] is the most free lord of all, and subject to none."**ⁱ Second statement, **"A Christian [person] is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone."**ⁱⁱ Both of these statements come from Martin Luther's 25 some page treatise called *The Freedom of a Christian* where he talks about the Christian's freedom in regard to God's law and gospel. Now it may seem like Luther is contradicting himself with those two statements. The first statement says that a Christian isn't subject to anyone or anything. And then he says in the second statement that a Christian is the servant of all. How can both of these be true? I'll give you a hint – the answer is in understanding and believing what God's law and gospel says to you. Now Luther talks about law and gospel in his treatise from 1520, but why don't we go to source from which Luther draws his conclusions from? Let's bring our attention to the Apostle Paul's words in Romans chapter 3ⁱⁱⁱ where he summarizes what God's law and gospel is all about.

We're going to be talking about law and gospel a lot this morning. These are the two teachings that frame a Lutheran's overview of the Bible. There's the law which says, *"Do this or else!"* We find this law in our consciences which gives us a basic idea of what's right and wrong.^{iv} We also have God's law which is summarized in the 10 Commandments as we read in our First Lesson.^v God demands perfect obedience. If we mess up even once, then God will punish us with eternal death in hell. Then there's the gospel which says, *"It's done. So believe it!"* The gospel is the good news of our salvation – how God has given us a Savior in Jesus Christ who died on the cross for our sins. Jesus has done it all. When we believe it, we receive the blessings talked about in our Gospel reading from this morning.^{vi} Law and gospel seem to contradict each other. But God uses both for the benefit of his children.

The Apostle Paul talks about what God's law and gospel mean for us in Romans chapter 3. Up to this point in the book of Romans, Paul had focused on

God's law. There is not a single person who can say they've kept it. Everyone is equally guilty before God. The law that we try to keep not only condemns us, it shows us how we've sinned against God. Paul summarizes his lengthy exposition on the law with these words, **"Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin."**^{vii}

Does that seem a little extreme to you? Everywhere else in this world, people understand if we make a mistake or two. Little mistakes don't bar us from job promotions or get us disowned by our families. A police officer isn't going to stop you if you're only going a little over the speed limit or if you have your registration sticker on the wrong part of your license plate. But God isn't as lenient as people are. For God is a just God. He demands perfection in every moment of our lives and won't accept any excuses. And there will be punishment on all those who break his laws because God is just. How right Paul is when he says, **"No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law."**^{viii}

This is where the other teaching of the Bible comes in, God's gospel found in the good news about Jesus Christ. God is a just God who demands punishment for sins committed. You, I, and everyone else has sinned countless times and deserve God's punishment. But as the gospel promises that God is not going to punish us. As the Apostle Paul writes, **"But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known.... [when] God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood."**^{ix} Christ shed his blood and gave his perfect life as the sacrifice of our atonement to receive God's punishment in our place.

It's that word atonement which sums up what the gospel is all about. If you look at it closely, you'll see it's made up of two words – *at* and *one*.^x When we say that Jesus is the sacrifice of our atonement, we mean that through him we are *at one* with God. All our sins are forgiven and washed away. Christ covers us with his righteousness. God's punishment for our sins has already been given in full to Jesus. That means there is no punishment over us now. That's what Christ's innocent death means for you – that you are *at one* with God and need not be afraid of him in any way. So listen when the gospel says, *"It's done. So believe it!"*

This freedom from the law because of the gospel is what Martin Luther had in mind when he wrote that first seemingly contradictory statement, **"A Christian [person] is the most free lord of all, and subject to none."**^{xi} The law no longer

has any power over us. Yes it still says, “*Do this or else!*” But its accusatory finger doesn’t point at us anymore. It points at Christ who died in our place and received God’s punishment. That’s why Jesus had to die on the cross. Because God is a just God. Now that God’s just punishment has been satisfied, there is only the gospel’s good news. You and I are now as free as Luther describes for there’s nothing we have to do for our salvation. It’s done.

And if you believe this promise, it is yours. Paul tells us that not only is God just, he is also “**the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.**”^{xii} Justify, that legal term from the Roman courtroom, where a judge declares somebody not guilty. And who is it that God declares not guilty? “**Those who have faith in Jesus.**”^{xiii} If someone doesn’t believe the gospel’s good news that say Jesus has done it all, then they aren’t justified. But if they do believe, then God justifies them and declares them not guilty for their sins.

Now it may seem like I’m repeating myself, but there’s a small nuance I want to highlight. The gospel’s good news only counts for those who believe it. God’s atonement is like a present that our Lord has gift wrapped and topped it off with a beautiful bow. Inside the wrapping paper is the full and free forgiveness won for you on the cross. Whether you believe that Jesus died on the cross to be your Savior or not doesn’t change what’s inside the present. Because it’s guaranteed by God’s almighty power and is already accomplished. But if you want to receive the gift, you need to have faith and trust in the gospel. Those who believe are justified by God. Those who don’t pass the present by.

I know this may sound harsh. But for the believer who struggles with their sins it’s a great comfort. Salvation does not come by our works or how well we keep the law. For the even the most pious believer has broken the law innumerable times. But I’m happy that my salvation doesn’t depend on what I do. For if you or I were responsible for even 1% of it, we’d be in constant doubt of our atonement. We sin each and every day. But because Jesus has done it all and God who justifies us by faith in him, we can sure that salvation is ours. In line with this thinking, the Apostle Paul writes, “**Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.**”^{xiv}

God gets all the credit for our atonement, not us. So as we live out our lives in the peace of his justification, we model the two statements that Luther wrote – we

are subject to no one while, at the same time, we are willing servants to all. This is how we show our thanks back to God for his gospel. And if you want a guide of how you can do that very same thing, I refer you to the law that once condemned us. All its commands are what God wants us to do. So out of love for him and to show our thanks, we willingly obey them knowing that our salvation is already taken care of.

Be the willing servant of all and put their needs before yours. Take a look at the people you live with and consider how you can serve them out of thanks to God. Consider the opportunities to spread the gospel through Grace Lutheran and see how you can serve your church with your time, talents, or treasures. Read through the 10 Commandments and Martin Luther's explanation in the *Small Catechism* or Jesus' explanation in the Sermon on the Mount to get practical examples how you can show the gospel in your lifestyle. Strengthen your faith by regularly coming back to the gospel so that Satan can't make you doubt if you are really saved.

Let everything you think, do, and say emphasize this basic truth from Romans chapter 3, **“For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.”^{xv}** That's the key to understanding law and gospel. The law demands perfection and we fail. The gospel offers salvation and we believe. That passage from Romans chapter 3 is the key to understanding Martin Luther's seemingly contradictory statements – that we subject to no one yet willing servant to all. The law has no power over us since Jesus has died to it. The gospel motivates us to follow the law's guide by putting others before ourselves just as Christ put us before himself. May the Lord help us to always believe his law and gospel so that we may never forget that God is just and the one who justifies those with faith. Amen.

End Notes

-
- ⁱ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, Originally published in 1520.
<https://www.theologynetwork.org/unquenchable-flame/luther/the-freedom-of-the-christian.htm> (accessed: August 17, 2017).
- ⁱⁱ Same as above.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 3:20-28. All biblical quotations are from NIV 2011 unless otherwise stated.
- ^{iv} Romans 2:14,15.
- ^v Exodus 20:1-17
- ^{vi} John 3:1-21.
- ^{vii} Romans 3:20.
- ^{viii} Same as above.
- ^{ix} Romans 3:21a,25a.
- ^x atonement. Dictionary.com. Online Etymology Dictionary. Douglas Harper, Historian. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/atonement> (accessed: August 17, 2017).
- ^{xi} Luther, *Freedom*.
- ^{xii} Romans 3:26b.
- ^{xiii} Same as above.
- ^{xiv} Romans 3:27,28.
- ^{xv} Romans 3:28.