

“Our Great Heritage: Law and Gospel”

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, and subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” With these two phrases, Martin Luther introduced the organizing principle and the main thesis of his 1520 publication, “Concerning the Freedom of a Christian.” At first glance, they don’t seem to make much sense, at least not together. They sound like they completely contradict each other. How can a Christian be both perfectly free and also a dutiful servant? How can he or she be both subject to none and subject to all? Luther himself admitted, “These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully.”

What follows in “the Freedom of a Christian” seeks to explain exactly what Luther means by these seemingly contradictory statements. In his explanations, Luther takes the reader through a course on some other statements and messages that don’t always seem to fit together. He discusses at some length the two main teachings of the Bible, law and gospel. Understanding the difference between these two teachings and the purposes of each, played a major factor in the Reformation. Finding from Scripture how these two main teachings relate to each other provided Luther with a peace and hope that he couldn’t find anywhere else. So also for us today. Understanding the Bible properly means recognizing its two main teachings for what they are and using each of them appropriately. This morning our sermon text from Romans 3 will help us consider these things.

The text begins, “**Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight [that is, God’s sight] by observing the law.**” The law is found throughout the Bible. By “the law” in this sense, we mean everything that God commands, both the things that he commands us to do and the things that he commands us to avoid. We heard one robust example of God sharing his commands when we read Exodus 20 earlier. The Ten Commandments provide a thorough summary and enumeration of what God wants and expects from us—the things that we should do and the things that we should not do.

It seems to follow, and many people assume that it is the case, that if God commands us to do certain things, that we must have the power to do them. It seems to follow as well that if God commands certain things, and we have the power to do them, then our relationship with God depends on us following through on the things that he commands. People naturally look at something like the Ten Commandments and believe that if I keep them, then God will be pleased with me. He will love me, and everything will be alright.

But that’s not how it works. It doesn’t work that way because no one has ever kept God’s commands. No one has ever lived perfectly the way that God wanted him or her to live. No one has lived without at least once falling into sin. Perhaps you could make a case that you have followed some of the commandments. There are probably many people here today who have never murdered anyone. But there are two problems with thinking about the law that way. One problem is we don’t get to pick which laws we are going to keep. We need to keep them all. The second problem is that God’s command doesn’t just forbid murder. Jesus himself makes it clear in speaking about these things that God’s commandments are not aimed only at our outward actions. They are aimed also at our hearts, our thoughts, and our emotions. We have broken God’s command not to murder whenever we have hated someone or intentionally caused them physical harm. We have broken God’s command not to commit adultery if we have even had lustful thoughts about others. And we have all certainly fallen short of the first commandment, that we never fear, trust in, or love anything more than we fear, trust in, and love God.

The law doesn’t show us how to earn God’s favor. It doesn’t tell us how we can have a good relationship with him. It tells us that we have not earned God’s favor and that we cannot have a good relationship with him. It condemns us for our failures to live up to every single one of God’s expectations. It shows us that we are sinners. It shows us that we have sinned. In the words of our sermon text, **“through the law we become conscious of sin.”**

In his “Freedom of a Christian,” Luther speaks about the law this way: “Here we must point out that the entire Scripture of God is divided into two parts: commandments and promises. Although the commandments teach

things that are good, the things taught are not done as soon as they are taught, for the commandments show us what we ought to do but do not give us the power to do it. They are intended to teach man to know himself, that through them he may recognize his inability to do good and may despair of his own ability.” That’s what the law does. It tells us that there is absolutely no way to save ourselves from the punishment that we deserve because of our sins. And if you have not learned that lesson, you have not listened to the law. If you think that God loves you or will love you because of something you have done, you haven’t really heard his voice when he makes his commands and issues his warnings.

But there is another message. It, too, is found throughout the Bible, in the New Testament as well as in the Old. It doesn’t say “do this” or “do that.” It doesn’t say that you deserve punishment, death, and hell. It says that Jesus did it all for you. It says that as a gift from him you have peace with God now and salvation with him forever. This is the message of the gospel.

Our text uses the word “righteousness” several times in connection with the gospel. Righteousness means that things are right between us and God. It means that God looks at us and sees someone with whom he is pleased and in whom he finds no fault. The law tells us that there is nothing that we can do to be righteous before God. The gospel tells us that God has made us righteous through Jesus. Our righteousness has to come from outside of us, because it cannot come from us. It comes from Jesus who lived the perfect life that we failed to live in every single aspect, keeping every single commandment in all facets, and who died on the cross because of our sins against those same commandments. God is just because he has punished our sins in Jesus, and he is the one who justifies, or declares us righteous, because he credits Jesus’ perfection to us through faith.

And so commands and promises, law and gospel, threats and assurances stand side-by-side in the Bible. At first glance they seem like they do not make sense together. But when understood properly, they teach all that we need to know about salvation.

That means that we need to be careful to use them properly. We cannot try to use the law as a way to become righteous with God. That still doesn’t work. It leaves people in despair and uncertainty. Nor can we pretend that the gospel is a mere invitation to do better through Christ so that he helps us to our salvation. That is turning the gospel away from something that is done for us and given as a gift to something that we need to do, a law. It remains one of the most difficult yet important tasks for the pastor, the congregation member, and indeed every Christian to continue to properly divide law and gospel, to keep each in its proper place, and to use each one in the way that it is intended.

This emphasis underscores for us once again the importance of worship and Bible study. How do we grow in our appreciation for and understanding of law and gospel? By hearing them applied, by applying them to ourselves, and by studying together how we apply them to all sorts of circumstances and situations. Many of you already know that we do that on a regular basis not just in church on Sunday, but also in Bible studies on Sunday and during the week. If you haven’t been able to attend Bible studies recently, now would be a great time to give it a try! Since righteousness is ours through faith, we will want to nourish and grow that faith!

Perhaps you notice in this discussion that our talk of law and gospel very naturally brings up many of the points we have discussed throughout this summer series. It forces us to consider again grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, and Christ alone. Law and gospel force us to give up on ourselves and to trust Jesus for our salvation.

That’s exactly what happened for Martin Luther around 500 years ago. He grew up in a church and at a time when the messages of law and gospel were thoroughly mixed up. He became convinced by what he heard and was taught that he needed to do something to be right with God and to escape an angry judge. He rarely if ever heard that Jesus gave him righteousness and salvation. He lived in real fear and terror. That is, until he read the Bible. He read it and studied it and studied it some more so that he could teach it to others. That is why he came to understand the differences between law and gospel. That is how God impressed on him their importance and gave him opportunities to preach and teach the truth. Based on the firm foundation of Scripture, he could say that all Christians are perfectly free in Christ and need no works to accomplish their salvation. Law and Gospel led him to that, and he never went back to a different teaching. May God grant that we also never stray from our great heritage in the law and the gospel.

The Text: Romans 3:20–28 (NIV84)

²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

²¹ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.