

Dear members and friends of St. John,

Lutherans are known as "**Law and Gospel**" Christians. And that's a compliment. The Bible can be a 'closed book' if you can't separate the Law found in Scripture, from the Gospel. Why? **Confusion abounds when you intermingle these two doctrines**, and the Bible begins to resemble a puzzle that seems impossible to solve.

Let me give you an example. In Titus 2:11, we read, "*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people...*" Sounds good. This sounds like everyone will be saved by Jesus coming to earth. Then in Matthew, Jesus says, "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven*" (Matthew 6:21, ESV). Wow. This sounds like only a limited number will be saved. How can this be? We know that the entire Bible is true, and since God inspired its writing, there can be *no* contradictions.

Turns out, both texts are entirely true. The text in Titus is the **Gospel** of forgiveness of sins for the entire world, freely offered up by Jesus' perfect life, and death on the cross. This is most certainly true. The text in Matthew is the **Law** – it's what we must do for our Lord to be saved.

The Law was given by God to show the utter impossibility of our keeping it. If you did not understand that there was a difference in doctrine, you might incorrectly conclude that the Bible contains contradictions. Or you might begin to believe that we must learn how to do "the will of my Father in heaven." It's not hard to find the Law. In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus says: "*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matt. 5:48, ESV). Seeing ourselves as sinners, unable to fulfill the Law as demanded by God, leads us to repentance: A sorrowful heart for our sinfulness, and the need for a way to be right with God.

Then, the Gospel is provided by a loving God to us to show us our sins, though many, are completely covered by Christ's blood, shed on the cross. The reason that the Gospel is called 'Good News' is that there can be nothing better for us in this world!

Christians that don't understand **the two doctrines of Law and Gospel** have a very difficult time with the Bible. But the Reformation (almost 500 years ago) produced several great theologians that unraveled the mystery for everyone: **The Law always condemns**, showing us how we can never satisfy its requirements by our own power or strength. **The Gospel points to a solution to the problem posed by the Law: Jesus comes to fulfill the Law for us!** Jesus completely satisfies the will of His Father in heaven for us. He takes on our sin. We receive His goodness, by receiving faith in Him. In Baptism, we were changed, receiving the Spirit of our Lord, and a saving faith that points us to the cross of Calvary!

If you **struggle** with trying to figure out **what is Law and what is Gospel**, you're not alone! Dr. Martin Luther said that it's challenging for everyone! You should know, however, that help is available. There are excellent study Bibles, like *The Lutheran Study Bible* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis), that contains notes and articles that help unravel the difficult passages for us. There are Bible Studies that help you develop a sense of Law and Gospel, so that reading the Bible can be more enjoyable and understandable. And there is Law and Gospel preaching that is found in your congregation and LCMS

churches everywhere. Your pastor is a resource for you, and you should never get 'bound up' in the Word, unable to move forward, since help is only a phone call away!

Finally, **the natural inclination of the heart is to try and take control of our Christian faith.** We want to be part of our own salvation. "Let me do something, God, so that I can be sure that I'm saved!" But this is false thinking. Going down this path, you can **never** be sure if **you've done enough.** There will always be that **nagging doubt.** God knew this. He knew that He would have to do it all for us, so that we could be truly free from the bondage to sin and the keeping of the Law. But that urge to 'do something' never goes away. When people tell me, "Good sermon, pastor!", it's often because they heard the Law and saw it as something they were either keeping, or thought they could keep in the future. **The fastest growing churches in America are Law-based,** giving people seven steps to improve 'this', or five steps for changing 'that'. **People love to hear it,** because they see it as a chance to make themselves right with God and others. But **the Law only condemns** – it shows us our failure!

The power for a changed life comes from the Gospel! God uses it to change our hearts and minds. Yes, the Law is always necessary, but only to bring us to repentance. The Gospel takes us **outside of ourselves** – and changes our selfishness into selflessness. Now, the Law can be used as a guide, since the changed heart and mind is ready to see it in the correct light. It's now a useful tool to guide us through life!

You may not appreciate Lutheran Law and Gospel sermons. Maybe you've been to another church and heard a "sermon that I can actually use!" But please know this. **You will be richly blessed** if you learn to separate the two great doctrines of the Bible: **Law and Gospel.** You're in a church that will help you do that. Thanks be to God!

Pastor Travis