

ON LAW AND GOSPEL

Law and Gospel

The One Distinction That Unlocks the Bible

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
Free for congregational use · larryherzogjr.com

Open the Bible almost anywhere and you will find God saying two very different things. In one place He commands: *You shall*. In another He promises: *I will*. One word tells you what to do; the other tells you what has been done for you. One demands; the other delivers. If you can learn to tell these two words apart—and, just as important, learn to keep them apart—you hold the key that opens the whole of Scripture. Confuse them, blend them, or run them together, and even the clearest passages will lie shut against you.

Lutherans call this the distinction between Law and Gospel. It is not a clever technique we impose on the text; it is the shape of how God actually speaks. And it is not optional. As the old maxim has it, whoever knows well how to distinguish the Law from the Gospel should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian. The reason is simple: nearly every error in the Christian life, and nearly every needless torment of the conscience, comes from getting these two words mixed up.

What the Law Does

The Law is God's word of demand. It comes to us as command, threat, and accusation. *You shall have no other gods. You shall not covet. Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* The Law is holy and good—there is nothing wrong with it. The trouble is not the Law; the trouble is us. Held up against a perfect standard, we do not measure up, and the Law is honest enough to say so.

This is the Law's chief work, the one Lutherans call its *theological* or *spiritual* use. It does not merely restrain outward wickedness or instruct us in what pleases God, though it does both. Its deepest function is to accuse. *Through the law comes knowledge of sin* (Romans 3:20). Paul says he would not have known what it was to covet if the Law had not said, *You shall not covet*—and then sin, seizing the opportunity, sprang to life and he died (Romans 7:7–11). That is what the Law does to a sinner. It does not make him better; it shows him dead. It strips away every excuse, silences every boast, and leaves the mouth stopped and the whole world accountable to God.

So when the Law has finished its work, you are not standing a little taller. You are on the ground. And that is exactly where the Law is meant to leave you—because a man flat on his back is finally in a position to look up.

What the Gospel Does

The Gospel is God's word of gift. Where the Law says *do*, the Gospel says *done*. Where the Law demands righteousness, the Gospel gives it—as a present, freely, on account of Christ.

The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). The Gospel does not tell you to climb; it announces that God has come down. It does not set a condition; it delivers a Person, crucified and risen for you, and with Him the forgiveness of every sin.

Notice that the Gospel is not simply the Law made gentler, or the Law with the volume turned down. A softer command is still a command. Advice, encouragement, “do your best and God will meet you halfway”—all of that is still Law, just Law that has lost its teeth and can no longer even do its proper accusing work. The Gospel is a different kind of word altogether. It is not an imperative but an indicative; not a summons to act but the report of an accomplished fact: *It is finished*.

This is why the Gospel can do what the Law never could. The Law reveals sin but cannot remove it. It can wound but cannot heal, kill but cannot make alive. *The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life* (2 Corinthians 3:6). The Gospel gives life because it gives Christ, and where Christ is given, sin is covered, death is undone, and a dead sinner is raised.

Telling Them Apart

How do you know which word you are hearing? Not by asking whether it appears in the Old Testament or the New—both Law and Gospel run through both. The promise to Abraham is Gospel; the Sermon on the Mount contains fierce Law. You cannot sort them by which testament they fall in, or even by which page they sit on.

The surer test is to ask what the word *does* to you. Does it make a demand, or make a gift? Does it tell you what you owe, or what you have received? Does it drive you to your own resources, or drive you to Christ? When a passage sets a requirement before you—love your enemies, be holy, forgive as you have been forgiven—that is Law, and it is meant to expose how far short you fall. When a passage sets a Savior before you—*while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly*—that is Gospel, and it is meant to comfort a terrified conscience.

The Confessions make the same point with unusual force. The *Apology* insists that the whole of Scripture divides into these two chief teachings, and that the Gospel, strictly speaking, is not a preaching of what we are to do but the promise that our sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. The *Formula of Concord* devotes an entire article to the distinction and warns that when the two are mingled, “the merit and benefits of Christ are obscured” and troubled consciences are robbed of comfort. This is not hair-splitting. It is the difference between a religion of the self and a religion of the cross.

Why Getting It Wrong Wrecks Everything

Mix these two words together and you get one of two disasters, sometimes both at once.

Preach Law as if it were Gospel—turn the commands into good news, tell the sinner that if he only tries hard enough, decides sincerely enough, surrenders fully enough, he will find peace—and you crush him. For the standard is perfection, and he will never reach it, and a conscience honest enough to know this will finally despair. Much of what passes for encouraging, practical, “relevant” preaching is Law dressed up as Gospel, and it leaves its hearers exhausted and unsure, forever taking their own spiritual temperature and never quite reaching a verdict.

Preach Gospel as if it were Law—make grace into a new demand, or empty the commandments of their sting so that no one need feel the weight of sin—and you produce a false peace, a security with no foundation. The sick are told they are well. No one is driven to Christ because no one thinks he needs Him.

The remedy is not to find some middle path between the two, some careful blend of grace-and-effort. The remedy is to give each word its full and separate voice. Let the Law be the Law, in all its severity, until it has done its killing work. Then let the Gospel be the Gospel, in all its sweetness, with no conditions attached—because a promise with a condition is no comfort to a conscience that knows it cannot meet the condition.

Where This Leaves You

Here is the pastoral payoff, the reason this old distinction is worth more than gold. If your assurance rests even partly on the Law—on your obedience, your feeling, your progress, the sincerity of your decision—then your assurance rests on you, and you are not a stable foundation. You will have good days and bad days, and your certainty will rise and fall with them.

But the Gospel locates your righteousness entirely outside yourself, in Christ. It is His obedience, not yours, that saves. It is His cross, not your surrender, that reconciles you to God. And because it is His and not yours, it does not waver when you do. On your worst day, the verdict is the same as on your best: *justified freely by His grace*. That is why a Christian who has learned to distinguish Law and Gospel can look squarely at his own sin—can let the Law say every terrible true thing it has to say—and still not despair. He has heard a second word. He knows where to run.

Learn these two words. Learn to tell them apart. It will change how you read every page of Scripture, how you hear every sermon, and how you sleep at night.