

A SAMPLE CHAPTER

The Altar Call, the Anxious Bench, and the Empty Pew

A Former Atheist's Case for the Rest Outside You

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CHAPTER TWELVE

The Master Key

You have already met this key, though you may not have known it was the master. Back in the chapter on the decision as a work, I set two words in front of you—*law* and *gospel*—and showed you how the one keeps getting quietly smuggled into the other. That was the first sketch, drawn in passing. I have been turning the same key in lock after lock ever since, all the way through, and the time has finally come to stop turning it and hold it up to the light and look straight at it. Here it is. It is the distinction between two words that God speaks—the law and the gospel—and learning to tell them apart is, according to the men who taught me, the highest and the hardest art in all of theology, and the very thing that separates a true minister of grace from a destroyer of souls.

That sounds like an overstatement. It is not. Luther said that anyone who has truly mastered the art of distinguishing the law from the gospel should give thanks to God and know himself to be a real theologian. Walther, the great American Lutheran who gave an entire year of evening lectures to this one subject and nothing else, said that nearly every error in the church, and nearly every torment in the Christian conscience, can be traced back to a confusion of these two words—and that once you can tell them apart cleanly, the whole of Scripture swings open like a door, and the crushed soul can finally breathe. I have found both men to be exactly right. I have come to believe that the confusion of law and gospel is the single disease lying underneath every last trap we have described. Learn the distinction, and you will not merely escape the three traps behind you. You will be handed the one tool that can keep you free for the rest of your life.

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So here are the two words, as plainly as I know how.

God speaks, all the way through his Bible, in two fundamentally different voices—and the first mistake, the one almost everyone makes, is to imagine that the two voices are two testaments: a God of law in the Old, a God of grace in the New. They are not. Both words run from Genesis clear through to Revelation, side by side, cover to cover, often in the very same chapter.

The first voice is the *law*. It is every word in which God commands, demands, requires, forbids, and threatens. Do this. Do not do that. Be holy. You shall. You shall not. The law tells you what God requires of you, and it is perfectly, even terribly, good at its appointed job, which is to show you the standard and then to show you that you have not come anywhere near it. But notice the one thing the law never does: it never gives you the power to perform the thing it commands. It only demands. The law is a set of instructions shouted at a drowning man—every word of it true, and not one word of it able to pull him out of the water.

The second voice is the *gospel*—the word means, simply, good news. It is every word in which God gives, promises, and announces what he himself has already done in Christ. It is finished. Your sins are forgiven. I have loved you with an everlasting love. For you. The gospel tells you not what you must do, but what God has already done—and it does not demand a single thing from you, because there is nothing left to demand; the entire debt was paid by someone else before you ever arrived on the scene. The law says *work*. The gospel says *it is done; now rest*. The law shows you your disease in merciless, accurate detail. The gospel is the cure, pressed into your hand for free.

And here is why the gospel can afford to ask nothing of you—because the law’s every demand has already been met, in full, only not by you. This is the great exchange at the very heart of the faith, what Luther loved to call the joyful exchange. Christ steps into your place and takes onto himself everything the law had against you—your sin, your failure, the whole towering debt, the entire weight of the accusation—and in the same motion he hands you, for free, the one thing you could never have produced: his own perfect righteousness, his own flawless record, his own standing before the Father. The law came to him with all its demands, and he satisfied every last one of them, down to the final farthing, on your behalf and in your name. Which is precisely why the gospel does not, and cannot, come to you afterward with a bill. The bill has been paid. Not waived, not ignored, not quietly softened—paid, in full, in blood. The law got every single thing it was owed. It simply got it from him. And that is the only reason a holy and just God can hand a guilty sinner a pardon with no conditions attached to it and remain perfectly righteous in the doing.

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Now here is the master insight, the thing that unlocks the whole book lying behind you.

Nearly every torment of the Christian conscience—certainly every single one we have described—comes from mixing these two words together. And it almost always

runs in one particular direction: a little law gets stirred into the gospel, a demand gets smuggled into the gift, until the good news quietly stops being an announcement of what God has done and becomes, instead, one more thing that you have to do. And the very instant that happens, the gospel dies—because a gospel with a condition stapled to it is no longer a gospel at all. It is only law wearing the gospel's clothing. And it is far more dangerous in that disguise than honest law ever was, because it comes at you smiling, calling itself grace, while it quietly lowers onto your back the very weight that grace was supposed to have lifted off of it.

So look back now, with this key finally in your hand, at the three traps—and watch every one of them turn out to be the identical confusion.

Decision theology took the purest gospel sentence there is—*Christ died for you*—and stirred into it a single drop of law: *so you must decide*. And that one drop swallowed the entire gift, and your salvation came to rest on a work of your own will. Law mixed into gospel.

The introspective Reformed system took the glorious gospel of sovereign grace—*God saves his elect, entirely, by himself*—and stirred into it a quiet demand: *now go and find the evidence of it in your own life, and reason your way to certainty*. And that demand sent you down into yourself, hunting through your own fruit for a verdict, and the free gift became a lifelong labor of self-inspection. Law mixed into gospel.

Perfectionism took the good news that Christ makes his people holy, and stirred into it a command: *and you must reach that holiness, verifiably, provably, or you cannot be sure that you are his*. And that command turned your sanctification from a fruit of the gospel into the ground of your assurance, and buried you under a standard no honest person could ever claim to have met. Law mixed into gospel.

Three traditions. Three disguises. One disease. In every last case, a demand was smuggled into the place where there was meant to be nothing but a gift—and your conscience, which can always smell a demand, and always knows perfectly well that it has not met it, collapsed under the crushing weight of a law that had been handed to it wrapped up as grace. The whole cure here, chapter after chapter after chapter, has been one single motion: reaching down into the gift and pulling the law back out of it. Letting the gospel be gospel again. Pure gift. No conditions. For you.

I should warn you that this key is far easier to describe than it is to wield. Walther insisted that the art of rightly dividing the two words is never mastered out of a book or a lecture hall; it is learned only in what he called the school of experience—under the

cross, in the dark, by a Spirit who teaches it to you slowly and almost always the hard way. You will read this chapter, and nod along, and understand every word of it—and then some grey morning the accusation will come, and you will catch yourself instinctively reaching for the law all over again, trying one more time to answer a demand you were never meant to answer. That is not a failure. That is simply how every Christian learns this. The distinction is not a fact you memorize once and then possess forever; it is a wisdom you get knocked into, over and over, every time the gospel has to pry your fingers off the law and remind you which of the two words was the one spoken for you. You will still be learning it on the day you die. So be patient with yourself in the meantime—the same way the gospel has been patient with you.

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Now I have to say something quickly here, before you overcorrect and go hurling the law out the window altogether—because that is its own ancient error, and it is no friend of yours either.

The law is not the villain of this book. The law is holy, and righteous, and good; it is the very will of God himself, and the problem was never the law. The problem was only ever using the law for a job it was never built to do. The law has real and necessary work in your life, and God gave it to you on purpose and for your good. It restrains evil, and keeps a fallen world from simply devouring itself. It works as a mirror, showing you your sin with a clarity you would never once achieve on your own—and this is its deepest and most crucial office, because a person who cannot see his own sin will never in his life reach out for a Savior. And even for the Christian, the law remains a good and kindly guide, a lamp that shows you the actual shape of the love that you now, by the Spirit, genuinely want to walk in. All of that is good, and needed, and I am not asking you for one moment to despise the law of God.

It is asking you to stop demanding that the law do the gospel's job—because it simply cannot. The law can command love, but it cannot create a single drop of it. It can command faith, but it has never once given anyone any. It can demand righteousness with perfect and terrible authority, and it cannot confer so much as a particle of it. Trying to squeeze your assurance out of the law is like trying to bake bread with a ruler: a fine tool, an accurate tool, and entirely the wrong tool for this. Assurance was never the law's to give. It has only ever belonged to the gospel—and the gospel gives it away for free.

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And there is an order to these two words, and the order matters enormously, and it matters most of all for a reader like you.

The law comes first, to do its hard and necessary work: to break the proud, to silence the self-righteous, to strip away every last handhold of your own supposed goodness until there is nothing left underneath you to stand on but Christ. And then the gospel comes—and the gospel must always, always come last. It must get the last word. It must be the loudest voice in the room when the lights go out. Walther said that a preacher who leaves a terrified sinner pinned beneath the law, without ever lifting him back up with the gospel, is not really preaching at all—he is committing a slow kind of murder. Law to the proud; gospel to the broken. And you—the reader I have been writing to all along—you have had quite enough of the law. You have lived under its accusation for years, for decades, for most of your life. You do not need one more sermon telling you to try harder; you have already tried yourself nearly to death. What you need—what you have needed the whole time—is to hear the other word, the one you were somehow never actually given, said to you plainly and without one single condition tacked onto the end of it: *for you*. You are forgiven. It is finished. Now rest.

* * *

There is one more thing this key unlocks, and it is the largest of them all.

Every religion that has ever existed on the face of this earth is, at the bottom of it, law. Do this, and you shall live. Perform the ritual, keep the code, achieve the enlightenment, purify the self, balance the eternal scales—and then, perhaps, if you have done enough of it, you may be accepted in the end. Strip away the incense and the vocabulary and every religion the human race has ever devised is saying the same three words in the imperative mood: *do, and live*. There is exactly one message in all the world that does not say this. One voice that reverses the entire grammar. And it is the gospel. The gospel does not say *do and live*. It says *it is done—now live*. It puts the whole achievement in the past tense, and in someone else's hands, and then it hands you the finished result as a gift. This is the single possession Christianity has that no other religion on earth can touch.

And do you see now, finally, the full horror of what the three traps actually did? By stirring the law back into the gospel, they took the one message in the universe that was *not* a religion, and they turned it back into a religion. They took the one voice that had

dared to say *done*, and they made it say *do* all over again. They robbed you of the only genuinely good news that has ever been spoken aloud on this planet, and handed you back the same weary old law you could have gotten from anyone, anywhere, for nothing.

This book has been trying, for twelve chapters, to give you back the good news.

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Here is the confusion out in the wild, because once you have seen it, you will not be able to stop seeing it. You have sat through this sermon a thousand times. It opens beautifully—God’s grace, God’s love, the cross, the sheer unearned kindness of the whole thing—and your chest loosens, and for a few minutes you can actually breathe. And then, somewhere around the forty-minute mark, comes the turn. The word *therefore*. And the *therefore* is exactly where the law comes creeping quietly back in. *Therefore, this week, commit to. Therefore, ask yourself whether you are really. Therefore, if you truly loved him, you would.* And you walk back out into the parking lot with the very same weight on your shoulders that you carried in with you, wondering, one more time, why the grace never seems to survive past lunch. It did not survive because it was never once allowed to have the last word. The sermon used the gospel to soften you up, and then handed you the law to send you home on. Once you have this key in your hand, you will catch that turn every single time—and you will learn to keep the grace from the first half of the sermon and quietly let the closing to-do list fall to the floor, which is precisely where it belongs.

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And here, at last, is why this key matters more than any single chapter that came before it.

You are going to close this book and walk back out into a world—and a church—that will go right on confusing these two words for as long as you live. You will sit under sermons that open in grace and land, forty minutes later, on a to-do list. You will read books that promise you the gospel on the cover and deliver a program by chapter three. You will lie awake some night years from now, and your own tired heart will start quietly stirring the law back into the gospel out of nothing but old habit. And in every one of those moments, you will have this key in your hand—and you will be able to do the one thing that actually sets a human soul free. You will be able to ask, of any word that comes at you claiming to have been sent from God: *is this law, or is this gospel? Is this*

a demand, or is this a gift? And when someone hands you a demand dressed up as good news—when the gift arrives with a condition stapled quietly to the underside of it—you will know. You will feel the law hidden down inside it. And you will reach in, and pull it back out, and keep the gift alone. That is a freedom that no one will ever be able to take away from you again, because it does not depend on your finding the right church, or the right preacher, or the right book. It depends only on your having finally learned to tell God’s two words apart.

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I went looking for this key across half a dozen traditions and most of my adult life, though I could not have told you at the time that a key was what I was hunting for. Every room I passed through held some real piece of the truth and some fatal confusion of these two words, and I kept moving on, restless, unable to name what was wrong, until at last I walked into the room where the distinction was simply made—cleanly, and on purpose—where the law was preached as law, hard and honest and unflinching, and then the gospel was preached as gospel, free and unconditional and given the last word every single time. And I understood that I had come home. Not because the people there were better than the people anywhere else. Because the two words had finally been pulled apart, and for the first time in twenty years, I could breathe.

So the diagnosis is complete, and the cure is now in your hand. But I can already hear the last great objection taking shape in you—the very one I promised, all the way back at the bondage of the will, that I would eventually turn and answer. And it is a fair objection, and it deserves the honest chapter I am about to give it. *If it is all gift, you are thinking, if there is truly nothing left for me to do, if the law cannot save me and the gospel asks nothing of me at all—then why do anything? Why not simply sin? Why even get out of bed in the morning? What on earth is left for a saved man to do with the rest of his life?*

That is the question of the next chapter. And the answer is going to surprise you—because it turns out that the freest people who have ever walked this earth are also, quietly, without ever being commanded to be, the ones who have loved the most.

This is where the sample ends. The rest of The Altar Call, the Anxious Bench, and the Empty Pew is the invitation it opens onto.

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