

Gospel and Law

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1. INTRODUCTION

If we speak about Reformation, we should not omit discussing the difference between Gospel and Law. It sounds rather theoretical, as you may believe, but it is very practical, as we will see.

Let's take the Tenth Commandment. I says to you: "Thou shalt not covet!" The objects of coveting are the house, the wife, the servant or anything else in the possession of your neighbour. Now, you may be a good citizen and you may never have stolen or committed adultery or killed anybody else. But you will not be able to maintain that you have never broken the Tenth Commandment. This commandment, too, is an integral part of the Law. It shows that sin is not only a matter of deeds, but also of thoughts and inner desires. It has its origin in the heart.

St. James says: "For whosoever shall keep the whole Law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (2:10). The Law itself says: "Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this Law to do them" (Deut 27:26). These are very serious words. If we take them at their face value, we should be frightened. They tell us, that who ever transgresses the Law only at one point, is guilty. They require a perfect life and perfect righteousness. So if a man strives to fulfil the Law but does not achieve its fulfilment, he is guilty. The judge will not have mercy with him. He does not consider man's good will and man's efforts; he only accepts perfect fulfilment and pronounces a sentence to death if he does not comply with each of the commandments.

Now let us consider that this is the word of *God*. It is written in the Bible. We can easily discover that God is speaking to His people in a way which sounds rather strange. There is no word of grace, no Gospel, but accusation and condemnation. And we must add that the Law is not only for the people of Old Testament Israel. Paul says in the New Testament, in his first letter to Timothy, "Knowing this, that the Law is not made for a righteous man, but for the Lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine" (1Tim 1:9-10).

It was Martin Luther, who for the first time has stressed the difference between Gospel and Law and who has shown the different function of both. In order to understand Luther's discovery, we should first of all have a look to what was taught in the times before Luther. Let me first speak about much false doctrine in the course of the centuries.

1. THE MORTGAGE OF CHURCH HISTORY

The problem that the relationship between Law and Gospel has been solved in the way of mixing up both has arisen already at a very early time in Church history. Already the apostolic fathers at the time of about 100 A.D. were willing to consider the Gospel as the new Law which Christ has taught. Clement, the Bishop of Rome was writing at about 95 A.D.: "Let us clothe ourselves with concord and humility, ever exercising self-control, standing far off from

all whispering and evil-speaking, being justified by our works, and not our words” (1Clem 30). This does not sound very convincing for reformational ears. It is a specimen of Early Christian legalism.

Similarly, Justin Martyr writes about 150 A.D.: “And let those who are not found living as He taught, be understood to be no Christians, even though they profess with the lip the precepts of Christ; for not those who make profession, but those who do the works, shall be saved” (Justin, Apol I,16). This may comply with the Scriptures, but it can easily be misunderstood in the way that the Gospel of Christ is nothing else but a rule of life which must be put in practice.

Barnabas, not the companion of St. Paul, but probably a Christian from Alexandria at the beginning of the second century, in his famous letter says: “He has therefore abolished these things [i.e. the OT offerings], that the new Law of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is without the yoke of necessity, might have a human oblation” (Barn 2). The Old Testament Law is set before us as a moral rule. It has been purified by Christ from the Jewish cult. Correct knowledge, which is the knowledge of Christ, is necessary to be able to do what Christ commands. At the end of his epistle, Barnabas shows forth two ways: One way leading to perdition, the way of darkness, and the other one leading to salvation, the way of the light. He characterizes the way of light exclusively by commandments: “Thou shalt not forsake the commandments of the Lord. Thou shalt not exalt thyself, but shalt be of a lowly mind. Thou shalt not take glory to thyself. Thou shalt not take evil counsel against thy neighbour. Thou shalt not allow overboldness to enter into thy soul. Thou shalt not commit fornication: thou shalt not commit adultery: thou shalt not be a corrupter of youth. Thou shalt not let the word of God issue from thy lips with any kind of impurity” (Barn 19), and so on.

The new Law Barnabas is speaking about is the old one. Only the obligation to fulfil it has been taken away. But the obligation to do it still remains. Barnabas is teaching Christian Ethics, but it is significant that he considers it to be the way of life. It is equally significant that he does not explain that faith in Christ or faith in the Gospel is the way of life. So the Gospel, promising forgiveness of sins, is mixed up with the obligation to do what the Law commands. The Gospel thus becomes a rule of life, a new Law which utters commandments, but not the great promise of forgiveness of sins and justification by grace. The promises of the Gospel are of course not denied, but the call to obey to the precepts of the Lord is put besides them and is gaining the attention of the believers. By this type of teaching, the Christian is called to observe continuously what he is doing and to take care that he does not do anything wrong. He must continuously be busy to adjust his way of life to the commandments of Christ. That in itself is not false, but as soon as it is considered to be the way to light without confidence in the Gospel, without knowing that also the Christian still remains to be a sinner and that he by his thoughts, deeds and works transgresses the commandments of the Lord day by day, it becomes a false doctrine. That is why we can justly say that already the post-apostolic time has misunderstood the Gospel in a legalist way. However, we can perceive a type of Christianity which takes its faith seriously. These early Christians have clearly seen that Christian faith has an ethical implication. Without any doubt, this is correct. But they failed to show that Christian life is by faith and that good works are the fruit of faith.

This type of thought has influenced the Church in the following centuries. However, the mediaeval Church became a sacramental Church. The idea that Christ is present in the Church and its sacraments became the leading concept. So the Christians were called to receive the sacraments. Neither did ethical aspects of Christian life play the same role as in the Early Church nor were people called to believe in the promises of the Gospel. In fact, moral trespasses became acceptable as long as the so called Christian went to the Church to confess his

sins and get absolved from them by the priest and as long as he did not separate from the Church and the sacramental grace offered by the Church. You can easily recognize that the idea that Christ is conveyed and received by the sacraments without faith in the Gospel is not biblical. Yes, Christ is communicated by baptism and the Lord's Supper, but he is received by faith and not by participation in a religious rite.

So the Church in the late 15th century had become superstitious in its understanding of the sacraments. In the northern countries, there was some interest in living an authentic Christian life. Thomas from Kempen (1380-1471), a monk from that city close to the Netherlands, who passed his life in a Dutch cloister, has written a very famous book titled: *The imitation of Christ*. Many translations have been made and it is still in print today. It was widely read. There was something like a revival of Christian piety in the late 15th century. Thomas was teaching that Christ has given an example in humility, God-fearing piety and love and that the Christians had to follow his example. They had to imitate him. So Christianity was conceived again to be nothing else but doing what Christ has done and what he has called us to do. Christianity is like a program for life which had to be put in practice. It is like paying a debt towards God. Here also, the Law is understood to be the rule of life for the Christian.

In fact, it is difficult to detect reformational thought in the writings of the mediaeval Christians. Also the so called precursors of Reformation, the Waldenses, John Wycliff from England and the Czech Jan Hus were not yet clear about that subject.

3. LUTHER'S DISCOVERY

This uncertainty was characterizing Christianity in the time of Martin Luther. So the Reformer had to deal with this issue. In the course of the years, Luther began to see the difference between Law and Gospel. He was reading the Scriptures about the function of the Law:

“Therefore by the deeds of the Law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the Law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20). – “Moreover the Law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom 5:20). – “For as many as are of the works of the Law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the Law to do them. But that no man is justified by the Law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. And the Law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them. Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree” (Gal 3:11-13). – “Wherefore then serveth the Law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made“ (Gal 3:19).

Luther had also seen and experienced deeply that God by His commandments is requiring things which sinful man cannot achieve at all. During his struggles in the cloister, he had often enough analyzed his thoughts and deeds in the light of the commandments of God and he had seen that he was unable to do what they were requiring. He felt the wrath of God. So, this insight together with the above cited portions of the Scriptures led him to the discovery that God is dealing with man in *two* ways. In one of his famous academic debates (1537) he said: “Because human nature is corrupt and blinded by the poison of the devil in paradise, so that it neither recognizes the greatness of sin nor feels and abhors the punishment of sin, the wrath of God and eternal death, the church must be served by the doctrine which uncovers and demonstrates these evils. That is the Law. And that we on the contrary may not despair because of the evils uncovered by the Law and shown to us, the church must be served with the other doctrine, which teaches consolation against the accusations and frights of the Law, grace

against the wrath of God, forgiveness of sins and righteousness against sin, life against death. This doctrine is the Gospel.” (WA 39 I,362.1-8). However, although the insight Luther had gained was something new in Church History, everybody could have read it in the Scriptures throughout the centuries before. It’s a doctrine which is plainly scriptural.

Luther is explaining this crucial issue in his later years, particularly in his lecture on Galatians from 1531 which was published in 1535, in a couple of academic debates and in his writings against the so-called antinomians. We can say in one line with Luther: One way is the order of retribution which is represented by the Law, the other one is the order of grace which is presented by the Gospel. The Law is the legal basis of the order of retribution. It requires man’s works to be fulfilled. But – still more important – it pronounces a sentence to death to the man, who does not fulfil it. The legal basis of the order of grace is Christ’s atoning death by which he has fulfilled all the demands of the Law. Within this order God is forgiving sin and justifying the godless without works of the Law. The Law is no longer applied in justification, because it has been fulfilled.

This discovery was one of the most important ones. I think, besides the rediscovery of the Biblical doctrine of justification, this is a key aspect in continuity to the doctrine of justification. The fact that God is speaking to us in two ways is most important for understanding the different parts of the Holy Scriptures. If we are not aware of this fact, we will mix up both with each other, and we are going to lose the Gospel as well as the real function of the Law.

However, in his lecture on Galatians, Luther is speaking in a way which is very devaluating and denigrating concerning the Law. To him the Law has been abolished, so that the Christian seems to have no positive relationship to the Law. This has become Lutheran doctrine, so that many Lutherans fail to recognize a positive relationship between the Christian and the Law. Luther, on the other hand, in his catechisms from 1529 as well as in his early writ *On Good Works* (1520), is showing forth that the Christian does good works in accordance with the Law. In fact, he is able to show that the aim of the first commandment can only be fulfilled by faith in Christ.

4. DOES THE CHRISTIAN HAVE ANY RELATIONSHIP TO THE LAW?

He does. First of all, the Christian, as far as he is living in the flesh needs to be reminded of his sins. So the Law continues its function to uncover sin also within the believer. Although he perhaps will not rob nor steal nor commit adultery, he nevertheless will time and again covet, hate, lie, be an egoist and fail to do what he should do and so on. So it is necessary that throughout his life he hears the Law, in order to show him that without Christ, he is under the wrath of God. Sometimes he will really feel the wrath of God in his conscience, particularly if he has deeply fallen in sin.

Second: Having become one with God in considering his sins to be sins and directed against God, and having recognized Christ, he will appreciate the will of God to be the better alternative. He will desire to do the will of God. That is what Paul says in Romans 7:22: “For I delight in the Law of God after the inward man.” However, he is no longer living under the Law, i.e. in an order of retribution. Much more, he puts in front of his eyes the fact that Christ has fulfilled the Law in his place and on his behalf. As a Christian and as a believer, he no longer meets a Law which is demanding a certain behaviour or certain deeds in order to become justified by them. He knows that there is no Law at all which could condemn him.

Third: Calvin in his Institutes says that the Law has to instruct the Christian how to live and that this is the proper function of the Law. Of course he acknowledges that the Law has been

given to uncover human sin. But he has in mind that Christian life has to honour God, so that the Christian should reflect the holiness of God in his lifestyle. As long as Calvin and the Reformed Church together with him maintain that the Christian nevertheless is free from an order of retribution, his position is scriptural. However, there is a danger to loose sight of this important aspect – that the Christian is free from any retributive order. The Gospel is definitely lost as soon as an implicit or an outspoken threat is standing behind the call to do good works. If a Christian fears that God may deduct something from his blessings if he does not obey the Lord, he perceives his being a Christian in the way of unbelief. And that is just no longer Christian.

The Westminster Confession says: “Although true believers be not under the Law as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified or condemned; yet it is of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life, informing them of the will of God and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for and hatred against sin; together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of his obedience. It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions in that it forbids sin; and the threatenings of it serve to shew what even their sins deserve, and what afflictions in this life they may expect from them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the Law. The promises of it, in like manner, shew them God’s approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof; although not as due to them by the Law as a covenant of works: so as a man’s doing good, and refraining from evil, because the Law encourageth to the one, and deterreth from the other, is no evidence of his being under the Law, and not under grace.” (XIX.6)

This is right as long as you take it literally. But there has always been a tendency in Reformed theology to mix up the Gospel with the Law. You may be accustomed to put it this way: “God has saved me, He has forgiven my sins, He has justified me, and now He is telling me by the imperatives of the Law: Do this, and don’t do that.” According to this view, your Christian life is the fruit of imperatives, the fruit of the Law. But, if you are taking it seriously, the outcome will be that it is nothing else but stress. You are always called to do something, to fulfil a requirement. It is as if you were living by good works, as if your salvation came from what you are doing.

As soon as you take the Law as a new obligation which has to be fulfilled again by the Christian, you are leaving the way of faith. As soon as you expect a blessing from God if you obey his commandments or if you fear that God will cancel his blessing to you if you are transgressing it, you understand your relationship to God within an order of retribution. This is against the Gospel, because such an order has just been abolished by the Gospel. In Christ, the threats and the promises of the Law are no longer matching. The order of the Law has come to its end in Christ. All blessings God has provided for us are to be searched in Christ and not in our obedience to the Law.

So, put it this way: “God has saved me, He has forgiven my sins and He has justified me. So, he is now telling me by the imperatives how to walk by faith and what fruits faith will bring forth. This in particular is the function of the New Testament passages which describe Christian life. In his epistles, Paul often fills the first chapters to show what Christ has done and what the goods of salvation promised by the Gospel are. He then proceeds to describe the ethical consequences. He does this often by saying, “I beseech you therefore, brethren” and some exhortations are following. So the imperative in the exhortations is sustained by the promises of the Gospel. The Christian should first be fully aware of the riches and goods God

has given him in Christ and he should believe all the promises of the Gospel. Then he will correctly use the exhortations.

5. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN LAW AND GOSPEL FOR BIBLE READING

Be aware of the fact that God is talking to you in two ways. Whenever you are reading the Bible you must look, whether you are reading Law, commandments and exhortations, or Gospel and its promises. For example, if you read in the Sermon on the Mount, that the aim of the commandment is that you not only abstain from murder but yet from wrath, insulting words and hatred and that you should love your enemy, you may feel constrained to say: “Yes, that is exactly what I should put in practice.” But yet on the next day you will discover feelings of hatred against your neighbour. You do not feel constrained to love him. You cannot discover the perfection Christ is demanding at the end of Matthew 5. So you will be disappointed because of your lacking religious performance. The joy of salvation is disappearing. You remain unsatisfied because you do not have the power to do what He commands. So Bible reading becomes less interesting. Maybe that you are tempted to become a charismatic, because the charismatics are promising more power of the Holy Spirit, but in reality they are increasing the stress of being a Christian and of becoming holier without Christ.

On the other hand, you may recognize while you are reading the fifth chapter of the Sermon on the Mount: Christ here is teaching the Law. And because the Law uncovers sin, He wants to show me the abyss of my sinfulness. He wants to make me spiritually poor. Recognizing your spiritual poverty, you will agree with Him and say: “Yes, Lord, I am as sinful as you are telling me. Although I have not killed my neighbour, I am feeling hatred against him and I have insulted him. In fact, I deserve your wrath and your condemnation to hell.” You thus confess your sins, and you are called to trust in the promise: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1John 1:9). So, Bible reading has a positive effect.

You will go on reading the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6. Jesus is criticising that many people are making a show by their piety. They want to be recognized by other people to be religious and to conform to the rules. They are doing everything in public: almsgiving, praying, fasting and so on, in order to be seen by the people. But Jesus says: “Do all that privately or without being seen by others, but believe that my Father in heaven is seeing it and that He will answer your prayer and give you recompense.” By these words, Christ is calling forth faith. He shows that God who is present in every place on earth is seeing what a person does. So, if he prays towards *Him* and not towards men, God is honoured by faith and such faith will get an answer.

In other places, the Bible clearly pronounces the great promises of the Gospel and explains them. I have in mind many portions of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, but also large parts of his other epistles. However, there are many other portions which in what they are explicitly saying are none of both, but are reporting history – the deeds of God or of men. But these deeds in some places have to do with the Law and with the Gospel. For example the appearance of God on Mount Sinai is closely related with the Law, and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the basis of the Gospel.

So, you will discover that Bible reading thus becomes interesting again if you are able to discern Gospel and Law. Let me add that it is the task of all the ministers and teachers of the Christian Church to take in account the difference between Gospel and Law. They should be able to show that Christ by his vicarious death has fulfilled the Law and thus provided the

righteousness which is counted for our justification. They should be able to show in their preaching, teaching and counselling how the Law is applied to the Christian correctly.

CONCLUSION

Let me sum up what I have tried to tell you:

First, say good-bye to the illusion that the Christian is able to fulfil what the Ten Commandments require.

Second, hear the Law as God's voice to uncover your sins and to show forth His wrath. Do not try to extinguish its accusation, but whenever it shows you that you have sinned, confess your sin and seek the forgiveness of your sins in Christ.

Third, remember that you are a Christian because you believe in Christ, in His accomplished work, his vicarious sacrifice, His once-for-all-atonement, by which he has fulfilled the Law and by which you are saved. And as you are walking by faith, you will honour God by your works.

So, dear Christians, cease to look to the Law in order to improve your Christian life by doing good works. Recognize that you are already made perfect in Christ's vicarious work and trust in Him. Live on the basis of His accomplished work and rejoice in the salvation He has given to you.