

Theology on Tap - Law and Gospel

In Lutheran theology, “Law and Gospel” is what we call a “hermeneutic”, which is a lens or way of looking at something. Specifically, “Law and Gospel” is a way of reading and interpreting Scripture. That is, God’s Word is both Law and Gospel to us. So, what do these words mean in this context?

Law – is basically God’s command to live righteously as his people. It is what God expects us to do. (This is often most clearly seen in places like the 10 commandments...)

Gospel – is the unmerited promise of God’s love, mercy and forgiveness to us.

And – this is maybe the hardest part of the concept! God’s Word is always BOTH command and promise at the same time, not one or the other. Often, we read a verse and think “oh, this is promise” or “oh, this is a command to do something”. But, the concept of “Law and Gospel” encourages us to see both all the time.

- For example, John 3:16, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son”...
- This also means that God’s Word is both Law and Gospel to me, not Gospel for me (and other good people like me) and Law for bad people, which is unfortunately where a lot of popular theology tends to go ... (i.e. God is for me and against you – and everybody can play this game!)
- Early Lutheran theologians realized that the Gospel, apart from the law, had no relevance in a world filled with chaos and evil... (“pie in the sky” has never been particularly helpful to people in real need) Conversely, the Law, apart from the Gospel, offers no hope...(simply preaching hellfire and damnation has also been generally ineffective in containing evil...)

In understanding the concept of Law and Gospel, the “**Law**” has two “**uses**”:

- “**Theological Use**” – the Law is a mirror, which we hold up to ourselves to see how we’re actually modeling Jesus’ command to love God and love our neighbor, and to be “perfect” as our Heavenly Father is perfect. Therefore, this use of the Law is always intended to drive us to repentance, and to seek Christ’s forgiveness ... ; note also that the “mirror” is Christ, and not my neighbor...(and when we honestly apply this to ourselves, it helps keep us from arrogance and self-righteousness)
- “**Political Use**” – the Law is there to restrain evil; that is, since we’re all still sinners and tempted to sin, Law is there to threaten punishment for evil deeds; and this is not simply “God will get you in the end”; in the 16th century, Lutheran theologians understood this as being both a civil and theological use ... (after all, at the beginning of the 16th century in central Europe, “Canon Law” was “Civil Law” ...)

The Gospel comes, perhaps surprisingly, second in this equation, paradoxically because it's most important. The Gospel – God's promise of life and forgiveness – is most meaningful and most important after we've been confronted by the fact that we have NOT met our own expectations, let alone God's, and that completely fulfilling the Law isn't possible ...

So what does this all mean for how we read Scripture and how we live in community with each others? Lots of things! But, I want to lift up three in particular. The idea of "Law and Gospel" means that:

- God's Word is supposed to have an actual impact on how we live our lives right now, not just what happens to us after we die; our understanding of "Law" is supposed to call us to constant reform in our daily lives, and to motivate us to act in our civil lives together in ways that "restrain evil"...
- We should always keep in mind two other key Lutheran theological concepts: "Simil iustus et peccator" (we are simultaneously justified and sinner – that is, nobody is ever so redeemed that they don't need the law in their life); and the distinction between "coram Deo and coram hominibus" (that is, our standing before God and before one another – before God, we are all equally sinners who fall short of the glory of God; before one another, there are distinctions in how we live with one another, which is why civil law has distinctions like "felony" and "misdemeanor")...
- We hear the Gospel as a real source of life and hope, especially at those moments when we realize that we've messed up again. Lutheran theology, like most classic strains of Christian theology, has a fairly pessimistic view of human nature, but an unbounded optimistic hope of God's promise of life and forgiveness in spite of our failures, and even our own death...