

Chapter 3: Law and Gospel

Introduction

Everything that God has to say to us in the Bible can pretty much be summed up in two words: Law and Gospel. In the *Law*, God tells us that we have failed, that we have done what is wrong, that we have not done our duty. In the *Gospel*, God tells us that he loves us, that Jesus died for our moral failures and rose to make us clean, that we are forgiven through Jesus. With the *Law*, God wants to show us our sin; with the *Gospel*, God wants to show us our Savior. These two categories – Law and Gospel – are key to “correctly handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

On a number of occasions I have had the privilege of teaching a course on Law and Gospel. I can always tell when people are studying these concepts for the very first time, because they are stunned when they realize how these extremely simple ideas give such clarity to the Scriptures. It takes a bit of practice to get used to finding the Law and Gospel in each Bible passage; but the effort pays off. Law and Gospel are key for good Biblical interpretation.

Definitions

Before we get started, just a word of caution. The word “Law” can have different meanings, depending on how it is used. In the Bible, for example, the word “Law” sometimes refers to the Old Testament (particularly the first five books of the Old Testament). By extension, sometimes “Law” refers to the Word of God as a whole.

However, when we speak of “Law and Gospel,” the **Law** refers to **God’s commandments**, what God requires of us. The “Law” shows us our failures and sins, because none of us have fully kept the commandments. Thus, the “Law” also includes the **judgment** of God, his **anger** against our sin. God is righteous, and he doesn’t put up with wrongdoing.

In the same way, the word “Gospel” can have different meanings, depending on how it is used. In the Bible, for example, the word “Gospel” sometimes refers to the first four books of the New Testament (the Gospel according to Matthew, the Gospel according to Mark, etc.). By extension, sometimes “Gospel” refers to the Word of God as a whole.

However, when we speak of “Law and Gospel,” the **Gospel** refers to **God’s love**, his **grace**, what God does for us. The “Gospel” shows us our Savior, because Jesus died and rose again for us, and through him we are forgiven. The “Gospel” in this sense is God’s **salvation**, his **forgiveness**, which he gives freely to us. God is love, and he wants to save us from the consequences of our wrongdoing.

Both are Necessary

Both Law and Gospel are key. In fact, both are at the heart of the Bible’s Message. At the same time, it is important not to confuse Law with Gospel. Each one has its own place and its own purpose. We cannot be saved through the Law, because we have all broken it. The Law only serves to show our moral failures. It is the Gospel, which sparks faith in Christ, that saves us. However, we don’t really feel the need for the Gospel unless the Law first leads us to acknowledge our sin.

Thus, the sixth guideline for Biblical interpretation is:

- 1. Recognize the Law and Gospel in each Bible passage and apply each in accordance with its purpose.**

A Summary of the Law

The Law can be summarized very simply: **love God and love your neighbor**. (See Matthew 22:37-39.) All of the other commandments in the Bible are specific applications of this general Law: love for God and for others.

God's Law can be found not only in the Bible; it is also written on our hearts. Our human conscience accuses us when we do what is wrong and affirms us when we do what is right. Of course, the human conscience is very imperfect. Sometimes we feel guilty even when we haven't broken God's Law; we've just gone against some human custom. Sometimes we repeat a certain wrong so many times that our conscience is deadened and we don't feel guilty anymore.

However, in spite of the limitations of our conscience, it still generally gives us a sense of right and wrong. Thus, it is fairly easy for us to understand God's Law. Even non-Christian people and non-Christian religions understand at least some part of God's Law.

Here are some examples of Law in the Bible:

1. Matthew 5:21-24 *"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift."* (NIV)

This is pure Law. God directly tells us to **love each other**, specifically by controlling our anger and refraining from insults and seeking reconciliation with those who have hurt us.

2. Romans 12:1-2 *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God--this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.* (NIV)

Here we are told to **love God**, specifically by dedicating our bodies and minds entirely to him, by not following the pattern set by the world, and by wholeheartedly accepting God's will.

3. Ephesians 4:25-27 *Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.* (NIV)

Here again we are commanded to **love each other**, specifically by telling the truth and quickly seeking reconciliation when we are angry.

Recognizing Law in Bible Passages

Different Bible passages present the Law in different aspects. For example, some Bible passages present the Law in the form of **direct commands from God**. For example, in Romans 6:1-11, the last verse states: *In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.* (NIV) Here is a direct command: we are to consider ourselves dead to sin, that is, we are to leave sin behind and live for God.

Here's another example: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 says directly: *Flee from sexual immorality* (v. 18, NIV) and *Honor God with your bodies* (v. 20b, NIV). Here we have direct commands from God.

Other Bible passages present the Law by pointing out **specific sins** that people commit or specific **good deeds** that God helps them accomplish. For example, Galatians 5:19-21 says: *The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.* (NIV) This passage directly identifies certain attitudes and actions that are sinful. (Galatians 5:22-23 goes on to identify God-pleasing attitudes and actions.)

Still other Bible passages present the Law through **examples**, stories of people doing right or wrong. These people may give **good examples** which we should follow, or **bad examples** that we should avoid.

John 1:23-51 relates the good example of Phillip, who shared his faith in Jesus with Nathaniel. The passage implies that we should imitate Phillip and share our own faith with others.

On the other hand, Matthew 2:13-18 provides the bad example of Herod, who was so afraid of losing his throne that he ordered his soldiers to kill the little children living in Bethlehem. This passage implies that we should avoid anything similar to what Herod did. We should fear (respect) God, not other things.

One final example: Numbers 21:4-9 relates the bad example of the people of Israel, who complained so much about God that he sent venomous snakes among them. This passage implies that we should trust the Lord instead of complaining all the time.

Still other Bible passages talk about the **consequences of sin** or give **reasons to avoid sin**. For example, 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 does not just give direct commands ("Flee from sexual immorality"). It also lists various reasons why we should avoid sex outside of marriage. The passage states, for example, that the body is meant for God, not sexual immorality (v. 13), that the body is important because God will raise it up (v. 14), that our body is part of the body of Christ (v. 15), that sexual sin hurts our own body (v. 18), that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (v. 19), and that our body belongs to God, not to ourselves (v. 19-20). All of this is Law, expressing some of the reasons behind what God wants us to do.

Another example: Matthew 25:31-46 teaches that we should love our neighbor through concrete acts of love on behalf of people who are in need. This passage does not only list ways in which we should help others; it also points out the consequences of failing to help. "*Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*" (v. 41, NIV) Failing to show love to our neighbor results in eternal condemnation. This is Law.

There are a few Bible passages that lack Law. When we come across one of them, we can usually find Law in the **immediate context** of the passage. "Context" here means the verses before and after the Bible passage. For example, Titus 3:4-7 (a traditional text used at Christmas) is pure Gospel. However, verse 3 (right before the passage) provides Law: *At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.* (NIV)

Functions of the Law

What is the Law good for? When we recognize Law in a Bible passage, how should we interpret it? How should we use it?

Theologians have traditionally listed three uses for the Law:

1. First of all, the Law functions as a curb (or to use other words, a brake). The Law curbs the evil in the world. Like brakes on a car, the Law halts evil, or at least slows it down. It does this in two ways.

First, the Law curbs evil because all humans – even non-Christians – have at least a bit of the Law in our hearts. When we do something wrong, our consciences bother us. Regrettably, the human conscience can be suppressed or confused. The conscience doesn't always reflect God's Law perfectly. Sometimes we feel guilty for no good reason, and other times we don't feel guilty even when we've done wrong. Nevertheless, even though it is imperfect, every human being has a sense of right and wrong. This helps our society as a whole to enact and enforce laws that are fair and right. Many of the laws of the land are based on the Ten Commandments. This sense of right and wrong also pushes society as a whole to disapprove of selfish, hurtful actions, and to apply negative consequences to offenders. It's not perfect, but it does limit evil in the world.

Secondly, God's Law limits evil by pushing Christians to take a stand against injustice, oppression, and wrongdoing of any sort. If we want to do God's will, then we will be ready to fight for justice. For example, it was Christians like Wilberforce who led the way to abolish the black slave trade. Again, this isn't perfect. However, God's Law does lead Christians to work to restrain wrongdoing in our society.

2. In second place, the Law functions as a mirror. The Law shows us our moral failures, where we have gone wrong. Human beings all too easily deceive themselves (1 John 1:8). We think of ourselves as basically good people. We like to believe that at least we are as good – or better – than other people around us. The Law strips away our pretensions. It makes us acknowledge our sin.

For example, I might think of myself as “good enough” because I haven't murdered anyone like those terrorists that I hear about. However, God's Law tells me that hating someone or insulting him is also murder (see Matthew 5:21-24, 1 John 3:15). I realize that I have “killed” with my words and my thoughts. Like a mirror that shows the smudges of dirt on my face, the Law reveals the smudges of sin in my life.

We continually need this function of the Law. Even when we have come to believe in Jesus, there is still a part of us that is rebellious. The Bible calls this part of us, the “old man,” the “sinful nature,” the “original sin.” We are always inclined to fall into what is wrong; and we tend to be blind to our flaws and their consequences. God's Law opens our eyes to reality and makes us recognize the need for repentance (a change of heart).

3. In third place, the Law functions as a guide. The Law teaches us what God really wants us to do. Our minds and our consciences often don't see God's will clearly. The sin in our lives makes us a bit blind, spiritually. For example, in ancient times many people accepted polygamy (a man having more than one wife) as normal. Today, some people accept homosexual acts as normal. They reason that if a man “loves” another man, they should be able to marry. Doesn't God want us to love each other? However, God's Law states clearly that marriage is between one man and one woman, and anything outside of that is not right. On our own, all too often we confuse what God wants with what we want. On some occasions, people have even killed or tortured others in the name of God.

For this reason, God’s Law in the Bible details what God wants from us. It corrects us and guides us so that we understand what God’s will really is. When a person becomes a Christian, he wants to please God, to serve God. The Law guides us. As a ruler helps us to draw a straight line, so God’s Law straightens us out with regard to what is truly right and wrong.

To sum up, we can say that the Law functions to correct us. It convinces us of our sin. It warns us. When we go off on the wrong path, the Law stops us.

Some Practice with the Law

Let’s practice finding Law in a few Bible passages, and using the Law to help interpret those passages.

1. Read 1 John 4:7-21. What is the Law in this passage? In other words, what is God telling us to do in these verses?

Give a specific example or illustration for how this Law should be applied to our life.

2. Read Luke 18:1-8. What is the Law in this passage? In other words, what is God telling us to do in these verses?

Give a specific example or illustration for how this Law should be applied to our life.

3. Read 1 Kings 18:20-39. What is the Law in this passage? In other words, what is God telling us to do in these verses?

Give a specific example or illustration for how this Law should be applied to our life.

The Danger of the Law

God's Law is good. However, we cannot be saved through the Law. Probably most common error in Biblical interpretation is to read the Law and think that we can get to heaven by keeping the Law. Theologians call this idea *legalism*. Legalism is the doctrine of salvation through good works (keeping the law). Nobody likes to be called a legalist; but it is natural to think that way. Heaven is a reward for our good behavior – isn't it? That's what most people believe. And that's how they interpret Bible passages.

Unfortunately, no-one can be saved through keeping the Law because all of us have broken it. The Law only shows that we are sinners and that we need Jesus.

Thus, we need the Law, but the Law just corrects us – it doesn't save us. To be saved, we need to pay attention to the Gospel.

A Summary of the Gospel

The Gospel can be summarized very simply: **God loves us** and saves us through Jesus Christ. (See John 3:16.) There are many stories and many details in the Bible which show God's love and forgiveness, but all of them hinge on this simple Gospel: God loves us and saves us.

The message of the Gospel does not come naturally to people. We prefer to believe that we can do something to earn or to deserve God's favor. Non-Christian religions may include at least part of God's Law, but they do not say anything about the Gospel. For people who do not trust in Jesus, the Gospel seems to be foolish (1 Corinthians 1:18). Nevertheless, it is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16).

Here are some examples of Gospel in the Bible:

1. Luke 23:34 *Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."* (NIV)

In this Bible verse, Jesus shows **God's love for us** by seeking forgiveness for the people who were crucifying him. That forgiveness is for us as well.

2. Romans 3:21-24 *But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.* (NIV)

Here the Bible shows us **God's love for us** in that sinners, whether Jews or Gentiles, are made righteous through faith in Jesus Christ who redeemed them out of grace (undeserved love).

3. Ephesians 2:8-9 *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.* (NIV)

This passage shows **God's love for us** in that he has saved us through grace (undeserved love), as a gift, not because we deserved it by our works.

Recognizing Gospel in the Bible

Different Bible passages express different aspects of the Gospel. Some passages speak directly about **the forgiveness of sins**, which is the heart of the Gospel. For example, 2 Corinthians 5:11-21 says, *God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against*

them. (v. 19, NIV) It also says, *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* (v. 21, NIV) These verses speak directly about forgiveness and reconciliation through Jesus Christ.

In the same way, in Luke 19:1-10 (the story of Zacchaeus), Jesus says directly, *“The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”* (v. 10, NIV) This text also speaks directly about the salvation that Jesus brings to those who are lost.

When we think of forgiveness and salvation, naturally what springs to mind is Jesus’ death on the cross. Of course, Jesus’ death is indeed of key importance. However, in reality every part of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection was necessary for his mission of salvation. Dr. Francis Rossow calls this the **“full Gospel.”** We should not overlook all that Jesus did to save us:

- a) His **Incarnation**: Jesus took on flesh and bone (human nature) in order to seek and save the lost (John 1:9-14).
- b) His **Humiliation**: Jesus left behind his powers and privileges as God, and humbled himself to the very lowest state in order to save us (Philippians 2:5-8). The theologians call this the “state of humiliation.”
- c) His **Ministry**: Jesus proclaimed the good news of salvation everywhere he went, and he sent others to preach and heal also, so that all could know of his salvation (Mark 1:15).
- d) His **Redemption**: Jesus paid the price to rescue us from eternal condemnation – the cost was his blood and his life (1 Peter 1:18-19).
- e) His **Victory**: Jesus won the victory over sin, death, and the devil for us (1 Peter 3:19-20).
- f) His **Resurrection**: Jesus arose from the dead and promises us a new life here on earth and eternal life together with him in Paradise (Romans 6:3 and 8).
- g) His **Exaltation**: After completing his mission on earth, Jesus once again took up his powers and privileges as God. He has all power and authority to help us and to forgive us (Philippians 2:9-11).

These passages all speak of forgiveness and eternal life through what Jesus has done for us. This is the heart of the Gospel. Theologians say that this is the **“Gospel in the narrow sense.”**

However, God’s love does even more than this. In addition to eternal salvation, God also gives us our daily bread, he defends us from many dangers, he answers us when we pray, he gives us material and spiritual gifts, and he helps us in many ways. All of these things are also Gospel. Whatever shows God’s love and goodness towards us is the **“Gospel in the broad sense.”**

Some Biblical texts do not speak directly about the forgiveness of sins, but they do point out some aspect of God’s love for us, the “Gospel in the broad sense.” For example, in Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus tells us, *“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”* (v. 26, NIV) These words don’t mention eternal salvation, but they do speak of God’s love for us, which provides the food that we need.

Another example: 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 explains that the Holy Spirit gives different “gifts” (special abilities) to different believers. This passage also does not directly mention salvation, but it does show God’s love for us in giving us the abilities we need to carry out our tasks.

A few Biblical texts do not contain any explicit words of Gospel. In that case, we can often **find Gospel in the context** of the passage. “Context” here means the verses before and after a Biblical passage.

For example, Colossians 3:5-11 is pretty much 100 % Law. It says that we should avoid sexual immorality, greed, lies, etc., and give Jesus Christ first place in our lives. However, there are words of Gospel in the verses which follow this passage. Verse 12 states that we are God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved. Verse 13 says that the Lord has forgiven us.

Illustrations of the Gospel

The Gospel has many different aspects. The Bible is full of different illustrations which express the message of salvation in different ways. As a Biblical interpreter, you should be watching for these illustrations.

Here are some examples of Biblical illustrations of the Gospel. (These particular examples are taken from the book “Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively,” by Dr. Francis Rossow.)

1. **Water:** The Bible compares salvation with living water which quenches our thirst (John 4, Psalm 36:8, Isaiah 43:19, Ezekiel 47:1-12, etc.). Humans have a spiritual “thirst” that only God can satisfy. Our sin separates us from God; Jesus eliminates our sin and in this sense gives us “living water.”
2. **Lawyer:** The bible says that Jesus Christ is our Advocate or Mediator. Today labor negotiations often require a mediator or arbiter between workers and management. Also, if you have to appear in court, you’ll need a lawyer to defend you. Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and us. He pleads for us before the Father and accomplishes reconciliation. (1 Timothy 2:5, 1 John 2:1, etc.)
3. **Washing:** The Bible compares salvation with being cleansed, washed (Isaiah 1:18, Titus 3:4-6, etc.). When God forgives us, our sins are literally removed, eliminated. Just as water washes dirt away, Baptism washes sin away (1 Peter 3:21). Baptism removes sin, not by the power of the water itself, but because the Holy Spirit touches our hearts to bring us to faith in Christ.
4. **Lamb:** The Bible presents Jesus as a Lamb sacrificed for our sins (Isaiah 53:7, John 1:29, 1 Peter 1:18-19, etc.). Jesus is not literally a lamb; however, the figure of a sacrificed lamb is an illustration of what Jesus did for us on the cross. Actually, all the lambs sacrificed in Old Testament times were foreshadowing what Jesus would do. Like the lambs, Jesus suffered the punishment that we deserved.
5. **Good Shepherd:** The Bible also presents Jesus as the Good Shepherd (Psalm 23, John 10:1-16). This illustration underlines the care and protection and guidance that Jesus gives. It also illustrates the death of Jesus, because “the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). The Good Shepherd is our substitute.
6. **Bread of Life:** The Bible often compares salvation to food (Isaiah 55:1-5). In John 6, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger.” If we don’t have physical food, our bodies weaken and eventually we starve. In the same way, if we don’t have “spiritual food” (the forgiveness and presence of Christ), we spiritually weaken and die. Man does not live by physical bread alone (Matthew 4:4).

This illustration is extended further in the Bible, to the means which God uses to bring us to faith. The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to awaken faith in us and to keep faith alive in our hearts. For this reason, the Bible often compares the Word of God to “food” (Jeremiah 15:16, 1 Peter 2:2, Revelation 10:10, etc.). The Lord’s Supper combines the Word of God with a literal eating and drinking, and so the Spirit “feeds” our faith.

7. **Covenant:** The Bible compares salvation to a “new covenant” or a “new contract.” This illustration communicates the truth of salvation through the language of negotiation and contracts. The “old contract” (the first covenant between God and man) was broken by human sin. God has every right to “sue” us humans and have us put to death. However, Jesus Christ, the mediator (1 Timothy 2:5) arbitrates between God and man, and effects reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18, Ephesians 2:14). As a result, God gives us a “new contract” or new covenant, which is even better than the first (Luke 22:20, Hebrews 8:6 and 9:15). This illustration is even reflected in the organization of the books of the Bible: the Old Testament and the New Testament.
8. **Legal Acquittal:** The Bible also uses the language of the courts to describe salvation (Romans 8:1 and 8:33, 2 Corinthians 5:19, etc.). We are like prisoners who have to appear before a judge. We have committed many wrongs. We are totally guilty and there is no escape. God, the righteous Judge, is at the point of pronouncing us guilty and sentencing us to death. However, Jesus is our lawyer (1 John 2:1) and he goes further than any lawyer in history. He not only takes our part, he takes our place. God declares us innocent, and declares our lawyer guilty. We go free and our advocate dies in our place.
9. **Redemption or Ransom:** The Bible says that Jesus is our “Redeemer.” Redemption means paying a price to recover something or someone. When we say that Jesus “redeemed” us or “ransomed” us, we mean that he paid with his life to rescue us (1 Corinthians 6:20, 1 Timothy 2:5-6, 1 Peter 1:18).
10. **Victory in the Fight:** The Bible also presents salvation as a victory that Jesus won over the devil and sin, after an intense fight (Genesis 3:15, Luke 11:21-22, Colossians 1:12-13, etc.). This illustration was very popular in the early church. It explains why Jesus would “descend into hell,” as the Creed states. If Jesus was engaged in a fight against Satan, and if the battle seemed to be in doubt at Calvary, it is only right that Jesus would celebrate his victory in the very camp of the enemy.
11. **The Second Adam:** The Bible pictures Jesus as a “second Adam.” Both Adam (the first human being) and Jesus Christ represent all of humanity. What one of them does affects the whole human race. The first Adam was tempted by Satan and fell into sin. The consequence was universal condemnation for all human beings. All of us inherit Adam’s tendency to sin, we share Adam’s guilt, and we suffer the same death as Adam. Centuries later, the “second Adam” appeared. Like the first Adam, Jesus Christ was tempted; but the second Adam overcame the temptations. This resulted in a universal blessing for all human beings. We share Jesus’ victory and Jesus’ righteousness and Jesus’ resurrection (Romans 5:19, 1 Corinthians 15:21-22). The second Adam brings a new beginning for all (2 Corinthians 5:17).
12. **The Name of God:** The Bible declares that the “name” of Jesus saves us (Acts 4:12, Romans 10:13, etc.). In today’s world, names do not seem to have a lot of importance. They are useful to distinguish between different individuals, but not more than that. After

all, “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” However, in years past, things were different. It used to be that a “good name” reflected a person’s honor, reputation, integrity, personality, and family. People used to fight duels to defend the honor of their name. In the Bible, God’s name carries a lot of weight. His name represents himself, his nature, his character. Actually, the Bible uses a number of names and titles for God, and each has special significance. Some of them indicate who he is; others reflect what he does. For example, the name “Jesus” means “God saves” or “God is Savior” (Matthew 1:21). The name “Yahweh” (sometimes written “Jehovah”) is related to the verb “to be” (God calls himself “I am” in Exodus 3).

13. Bride and Groom: The Bible very often compares Jesus Christ to a groom, and we (his people) to a bride. See Psalm 45, Song of Solomon (the entire book), Isaiah 61:10 and 62:5, Jeremiah 3, Ezekiel 23, Hosea (the entire book), Matthew 25:1-10, Ephesians 5:22-33, etc. In this illustration, Jesus “marries” us, and the sign of this wedding is not a ring but the cross. This simple figure underlines the depth of God’s love for us. It also emphasizes the truth that Jesus (not we ourselves) takes the initiative in our salvation, just like the gentleman traditionally was the one who courted the lady and asked for her hand (see John 15:16, 1 John 4:19). Furthermore, when we marry someone, we need to learn to love not just our spouse but their whole family. In the same way, when we are “married” to Jesus, we need to learn to love his whole family (all human beings, particularly the church). Finally this illustration also reflects the eternal joy that will be ours in heaven, because everyone knows that the couple should “live happily ever after.”

14. New Clothes: In the Bible, it is common to explain salvation with the illustration of putting on new clothes or clean clothes (Zechariah 3:3-4, Romans 13:14). In our daily life, we first bathe and then put on our clothes. Thus also the Christian, washed clean of his sins in Baptism, puts on the “new clothes” of Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:26-27). Sometimes the “new clothes” illustration is combined with the “bride and groom” illustration. The bride dresses her best for the wedding, and her beautiful dress is the gift of the groom (Isaiah 61:10, Revelation 21:2). This figure of new clothes is particularly good for communicating that we are saved not through our own righteousness but by the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

There are many, many more illustrations of the Gospel in the Bible. Here are just a few more: The Bible describes salvation as a “new birth” (John 3, John 1:18, 1 Peter 1:23-25), as “eternal life” (John 11:25), “abundant life” or simply “life,” as “light” (John 8:12), as an “inheritance” (Ephesians 1:7, 13-14; Colossians 1:10-13), as “belonging to God,” as “adoption as God’s children” (Ephesians 1:3-6), as “intercession” (Romans 8:33-34), as “reconciliation” (Ephesians 2:14-16, 2 Corinthians 5:18-19), as “peace” (John 14:27), as “forgiveness” (Jeremiah 31:34, Micah 7:18-19), as an “expiation” or “propitiation” (Hebrews 2:17-18), as a “sacrifice” in our place (Isaiah 53:6-7, Revelation 5:13), as a “refuge” (Psalm 62:5-8), as “liberation, freedom” (Isaiah 61:1-2, Romans 8:1-2).

For more Gospel illustrations, see the book “Just Words” by Dr. Jacob Preuss, or see chapter 2 of the book “Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively” by Dr. Francis Rossow.

The Function of the Gospel

What is the Gospel good for? When we recognize Gospel in a Bible passage, how should we interpret it? How should we use it?

The Gospel has just one main use. It functions like medicine. It heals us from the sickness of our sin. The Gospel awakens faith in Jesus Christ. It shows us God's love and invites us to trust in him. In particular, it shows us how Jesus Christ died and rose in order to forgive our moral failure and to give us eternal life.

The word "Gospel" means "good news." In the newspaper we continually find a lot of bad news. In the Bible, the "bad news" is the Law, which reveals the ugly truth about our sin. However, there is also good news, the Gospel, which points us to our Savior.

We need the Law, even though it makes us uncomfortable. However, the Law is not an end in itself. The Law is a tool that God uses to prepare the heart for the Gospel. Some people understand the Law in the Bible very well, but leave the Gospel to one side. To do that is to lose the main point of the Bible.

In order to be a good interpreter of the Bible, we need to recognize the Gospel in different Bible passages and present it clearly.

The Danger of the Gospel

With regard to Law and Gospel, by far the most common danger is for the interpreter to focus so much on the Law that he or she forgets or minimizes the Gospel, the message of salvation through Jesus. We've already talked about this danger.

However, some people go to the other extreme. They speak almost exclusively about the Gospel and set aside the Law. They emphasize that "God is love" but not that "God commands us to love." Years ago, theologians called this practice *Gospel reductionism*. Gospel reductionism means reducing the message of God's Word to just the Gospel, setting aside or ignoring the Law.

So what's wrong with this? After all, the Bible says that we are "not under the law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14). Be careful! This Bible verse means that those who trust in Jesus are no longer under the Law's condemnation, because God in his grace (his undeserved love) has saved us. It does not mean that we are free to sin (break the Law)! In fact, the very next verse (Romans 6:15) says, "Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!" (NIV) On the contrary, since we are saved by grace, Jesus is with us and gives us power to resist sin.

When we set aside the Law, our old sinful nature takes advantage of the situation and convinces us that what we do or say or think is not important. Theologians call this *libertinism*. Libertinism is being morally unrestrained. We think that it doesn't matter what we do, because in the end, we will be saved anyway by grace.

The biblical authors Paul and James had to struggle against people in the church who thought this way. These people said that they had faith in Christ but there was no repentance, no change of heart. St. Paul said in Romans 6 that when we trust in Jesus, we die to sin. How can we go back to it? James said in James 2 that true faith brings changes, brings good works. If faith doesn't lead to good works, then it is not saving faith. Both St. Paul and James spoke words of Law to those people who claimed to be saved by faith but at the same time let sin have free rein in their lives. They weren't repentant – they just didn't care. People who are unrepentant need to hear the Law. The Gospel is for those who are repentant because they already heard the Law and took it to heart. Law without Gospel cannot save anyone. Gospel without Law is like throwing pearls before pigs. They don't appreciate it and they don't use it.

So.... In summary, the Law corrects. The Gospel heals. We need both at the right time and place.

Some Practice with the Gospel

Let's practice finding Gospel in a few Bible passages, and using the Gospel to help interpret those passages.

1. Read 1 John 4:7-21. What is the Gospel in this passage? In other words, what does this passage say that God has done for us or what he will do for us? What illustration of the Gospel is used?

Explain how this is good news for our lives today.

2. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-20. What is the Gospel in this passage? In other words, what does this passage say that God has done for us or what he will do for us? What illustration of the Gospel is used?

Explain how this is good news for our lives today.

3. Read Mark 1:14-20. What is the Gospel in this passage? In other words, what does this passage say that God has done for us or what he will do for us? What illustration of the Gospel is used?

Explain how this is good news for our lives today.

Applying Law and Gospel Appropriately

It is sometimes said that the job of a biblical preacher is to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” This means that the “afflicted” (those who are repentant) generally need most the comfort of the Gospel. On the other hand, the “comfortable” (those who don’t yet acknowledge or reject their sin) generally need most the afflicting words of the Law. Let’s take a look at a few examples.

Luke 18:18-25

A certain leader asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answered that he should keep the commandments. Why did Jesus answer him this way? Did he mean that we should try to be saved by keeping the commandments?

No. Jesus was speaking words of Law to someone who was not yet repentant. This leader figured he could do something to earn heaven. When Jesus told him to keep the commandments, he replied that he had kept them all from childhood. Do you see any repentance here? Did this man admit that he had sinned? Not at all.

As a matter of fact, if we could perfectly keep the commandments, we would go to heaven. But no one keeps the commandments perfectly. The very first commandment tells us to have “no other gods,” to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” However, this leader had a “false god” in his life, something he loved more than the Lord: his money. When Jesus told him to sell everything and give it to the poor, he went away sad.

Jesus spoke words of Law to this man in order to expose his sin. The man went away because he wasn’t ready to give up his “false god.” Later, Jesus did speak some words of Gospel, not to this leader but to his disciples. When the disciples said, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus responded, “What is impossible for men is possible for God” (Luke 18:26-27).

So, the leader needed some afflicting words (Law). The disciples needed some comforting words (Gospel).

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus went to eat dinner with Zacchaeus, one of the chief tax collectors. Why would Jesus do such a thing? The tax collectors in the Roman Empire were famous for their corruption and for betraying their own country for money. This would be like Jesus going to eat dinner with a drug lord today. Why didn’t Jesus rebuke Zacchaeus for his lifestyle? Why did he let him off the hook so easily?

Here Jesus spoke words of Gospel to someone who was repentant. He didn’t have to rebuke Zacchaeus, because the tax collector was already well aware of his sin (see verse 8). Notice that Zacchaeus, like the leader in Luke 18, had allowed money to become his “false god.” However, unlike the leader in Luke 18, Zacchaeus was ready for a change. He was repentant and entered the kingdom of God by grace.

Zacchaeus needed some comforting words (Gospel).

Romans 3:21-26, Romans 4:13-16, Ephesians 2:8-10, James 2:14-19

Romans 3:21-22 states clearly that the righteousness of God is shown through faith, apart from the law. Ephesians 2:8-9 also emphasizes that we are justified by grace (undeserved love) through faith, apart from works of the law. But James 2:24 says that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Which is true? Are we saved by faith alone or faith plus works?

The question is complicated even more, because Romans 4:1-5 uses Abraham as an example of the fact that faith alone (without works) saves a person. Yet James 2:20-24 seems to say that Abraham is an example of the fact that faith without works is useless. Does the Bible contradict itself after all?

First of all, the word “faith” is being used in a different sense in Romans and in James. Romans uses the word “faith” in the sense of a whole-hearted trust in Jesus Christ. In other words, in the book of Romans a person who has faith is a person who has repented, who has been changed, who has become a follower of Jesus. By contrast, James uses the word “faith” in the sense of an intellectual knowledge or belief in certain facts, without any life changes (see James 2:19). In other words, in the book of James a person who has faith may know that Jesus is the Savior but he or she might not have repented or trusted in Jesus. By paying attention to the context, we can see that Romans and James are not contradicting each other but speaking of two different situations.

Secondly, the categories of Law and Gospel help us understand what each passage is saying. On the one hand, Romans 3 (and 4) and Ephesians 2 are directed towards people who are repentant. Paul already laid out God’s Law and his condemnation of sin in Romans 1 and 2 (and in the first part of chapter 3). The apostle Paul says that “all have sinned” (Romans 3:23). Now it is time to express the message of the Gospel. Clearly faith alone saves us, because our works have not been adequate to keep God’s Law.

On the other hand, James 2 is directed towards people who are not repentant. It is clear that these people say they have faith in Christ but their lives show that they are not following him. Their “faith” is nothing more than a belief that God exists. They think that as long as they believe that God exists, they can sin as much as they want. James says that this supposed “faith” is dead. It cannot save. In other words, James proclaims Law to people who are not repentant. If you have real faith, there will be changes in your lifestyle. Abraham was saved by his faith, and that faith caused him to act, to obey God even if it cost him his son’s life. Romans says that faith alone saves us; James says that real faith will motivate good works.

In reality, the book of Romans also speaks Law to people who say they have faith but are not repentant. Romans 6 emphasizes that Christians have “died to sin;” how can we then still live in sin? Real faith (trust in Jesus) does not result in more sinning, but in a life of sin. Ephesians 2:8-10 says clearly that we are saved by grace alone, faith alone; but that faith leads us to do good works. Thus, Romans and Ephesians and James are all in agreement – we just need to use Law and Gospel to apply each one to the correct situation.

1 Timothy 1:8-17

Finally, let’s look at one more passage. 1 Timothy 1:8-11 states that “the law is good.” It accuses and condemns those who do wrong or who go against “sound doctrine” (the message of salvation). When the apostle Paul was persecuting the Christian church, he was under this condemnation.

However, 1 Timothy 1:12-17 states that God had mercy on Paul in spite of his sin. He did this to show his forgiveness and to invite others to trust him and to have eternal life. A repentant Paul was saved by Jesus.

Thus, Law and Gospel are both good, both necessary, both part of the Word of God. But each one has its place and needs to be applied in the right way.