

Law and Gospel

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Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther (1811-1887) was born in Langenchursdorf, Saxony. He attended the Gymnasium at Schneeedberg and the University of Leipzig and ordained into the Lutheran ministry in 1837. He was profoundly influenced by Martin Stephan, pastor in Dresden, and came into the Erweckungsbewegung, the newly awakened Lutheran confessional movement. He joined the emigrants under Stephan, arriving in Missouri in early 1839. Here he was made pastor at Dresden and Johannisberg, Perry County, Missouri. In 1841 Ferdinand succeeded his brother Otto Herman as pastor of the Saxon church in St. Louis. In 1849 he became professor of theology at Concordia Seminary, which moved from Perry County to St. Louis in December of that year.

He was the first president of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and other States (The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod), founded in 1847, and the first president of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, founded in 1872, a federation of German and one Norwegian Lutheran synods which was strictly confessional.

This article is taken from his most noted work, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*.

TENTH EVENING LECTURE.

(November 28, 1884.)

The most important resolution a person can make by the almighty grace of God is to become a true Christian. Yet this resolution cannot make him truly happy and save his soul if he is not in full earnest when forming this resolution. Many thousands have resolved to quit the world body and soul and to choose the narrow path of the children of God. They did this after they had quaffed the cup of the world's joys to the dregs. Many, after learning by some sad experience the truth of that Bible passage: "Sin is a reproach to any people," Prov. 14, 34, have made up their minds to quit their sins, even their pet sins. Many thousands have been tormented with uncertainty day and night as to whether they were in a state of grace, whether they were accepted by God as His dear children, and whether their sins were forgiven. They have been filled with anguish when they asked themselves the question: "If I were to die to-day, would I be saved?" In this state

of mind they have resolved to seek the grace of God and the forgiveness of their sins.

What has been the outcome? The majority of those who had formed this resolution did not carry it out. They postponed the execution days, weeks, months, years. Forming the resolution is as far as they got. Finally death overtook them, and they were lost forever.

Why was this? They were not in earnest when forming their resolution. True, God is so patient, kind, and gracious as to forgive Christians their sins of weakness and frailties daily and richly. But He does this only to those who are really in earnest about being Christians. When this earnestness is lacking, a person is not a true Christian.

Now, a situation similar to this obtains when a person resolves to become a servant of Christ, a minister of the Church of Christ and His Word. This, too, is a momentous resolution, but a gratifying one only when backed by earnest endeavor. When a person wants to become a servant of the Gospel, he must be so disposed towards his Lord Jesus Christ as to be able to say to Him: "My dear Lord Jesus, Thou art mine; therefore, I wish to be Thine. All that I possess, my body and my soul, my strength and my gifts, and all that I do, my entire life, shall be consecrated to Thee, to Thee alone. Lay on me any burden Thou pleasest, I shall gladly bear it. Lead me anywhere, through sorrow or joy, through good fortune or misfortune, through shame or honor, through favor of men or their disfavor, grant me a long life, or should I die an early death, — I shall be satisfied with anything. Lead the way, and I shall follow." That is the sentiment which our dear Paul Gerhardt has expressed in one of his hymns: —

**I cleave now and forever
To Christ, a member true;
My Head will leave me never,
Whate'er He passes through.
He treads the world beneath
His feet and conquers death
And hell and breaks sin's thrall;
I'm with Him through it all.**

Such was the apostle's devotion from the moment when the Lord had appeared to him and had spoken to him. He relates himself that, when he had received the divine call to go and preach the Gospel of Christ among the heathen, he conferred not with flesh and blood, Gal. 1, 16, but obeyed promptly. Blessed Paul! His activity was favored with success beyond telling. And now he is with God; he has beheld his Savior face to face for more than eighteen hundred years and is praising and magnifying Him world without end.

O my dear friends, I know, you are all resolved to enter the holy ministry, in which you intend to serve Christ and His Church by preaching His saving Word. Oh, be in full earnest about it! If not, your resolution will come to naught. If God has tried to lead you to this resolve at an early time, but you refused to follow Him and stifled the voice of the Holy Spirit in your hearts, all those blessed moments of prompting from God will bear testimony against you at His throne. On the other hand, you are blessed men if you have carried out your resolution. You will never complain about the heartache and anguish and distress through which you had to pass. You will rather be full of joy on the day when the Lord will place His hand, with the nail-prints, on you and put the crown of glory on your head.

Now, then, what is your chief task when about to enter the sacred ministry? You are to proclaim to a world of sinners both Law and Gospel. You are to do this clearly, perfectly, and with a fervent spirit. This reflection leads us to the consideration of :

Thesis VI.

In the second place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the Law is not preached in its full sternness and the Gospel not in its full sweetness, when, on the contrary, Gospel elements are mingled with the Law and Law elements with the Gospel.

Our object is to meditate upon the distinction between Law and Gospel, and on the ever-present danger and harm of mingling the one with the other. In our last lecture we began our review of the various occasions on which this danger confronts us. However, the commingling of both doctrines occurs also when Gospel elements are mingled with the Law, and *vice versa*. Let us investigate what Scripture says regarding this matter. To begin with, what does it say concerning the Law? How does it show us that we must not mingle any evangelical ingredient into the Law?

The principal passage yielding us the desired information is Gal. 3, 11. 12: *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.* A precious text! A person becomes righteous in the sight of God solely by faith. What conclusion must be drawn from this fact? This, that the Law cannot make any person righteous because it has not a word to say about justifying and saving faith. That information is found only in the Gospel. In other words, the Law has nothing to say about grace.

Rom. 4, 16 the apostle tells us: *Therefore it [righteousness] is of faith that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the Law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.* Faith is demanded of us, not in order that there might be at least some little work that we are to do, as otherwise there would be no difference

between those who go to hell and those who go to heaven. No; righteousness is of faith in order that it may be of grace. Both statements are identical. When I say: "A person becomes righteous in the sight of God by faith," I mean to say: "He becomes righteous gratuitously, by grace, by God's making righteousness a gift to him." Nothing is demanded of the person; he is only told: "Stretch out your hand, and you have it." Just that is what faith is — reaching out the hand. Suppose a person had never heard a word concerning faith and, on being told the Gospel, would rejoice, accept it, put his confidence in it, and draw comfort from it, that person would have the true, genuine faith, although he may not have heard a word concerning faith.

No Gospel element, then, must be mingled with the Law. Any one expounding the Law shamefully perverts it by injecting into it grace, the grace, lovingkindness, and patience of God, who forgives sin. He acts like a sick-nurse, who fetches sugar to sweeten the bitter medicine, which the patient dislikes. What is the result? Why, the medicine does not take effect, and the patient remains feverish. In order that it might retain its strength the medicine should not have been sweetened. A preacher must proclaim the Law in such a manner that there remains in it nothing pleasant to lost and condemned sinners. Every sweet ingredient injected into the Law is poison; it renders this heavenly medicine ineffective, neutralizes its operation.

Matt. 5, 17-19 the Lord says: *Think not that I am come to destroy the Law or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the. Law till all be fulfilled. Whosoever, therefore, shall break one of these least commandments and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven; but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.* When preaching the Law, you must ever bear in mind that the Law makes no concessions. That is utterly beside the character of the Law; it only makes demands. The Law says: "You must do this; if you fail to do it, you have no recourse to the patience, lovingkindness, and longsuffering of God; you will have to go to perdition for your wrong-doing." To make this point quite plain to us, the Lord says: "Whosoever shall break one of these least commandments and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven." That does not mean, he shall have the lowest place assigned him in heaven, but he does not belong in the kingdom of heaven at all.

Gal. 3, 10 Paul writes: *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 in the Book of the Law to do them.* If you would direct men to do good works and for their comfort add a remark like this: "You should, indeed, be perfect; however, God does not demand the impossible from us. Do what you can in your weakness; only be sincere in your intention!" — I say, if you would speak thus, you would be preaching a damnable doctrine; for that is a shameful corruption of the Law. God never spoke like that from Sinai.

Rom. 7, 14 the same apostle writes: *We know that the Law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin.* When a minister preaches the Law, he must by all means bear in mind that the Law is spiritual; it works on the spirit, not on some member of the body; it is directed to the spirit in man, to his will, heart, and affections. That is the way it operates in every instance. When the Law says: "Thou shalt not kill," that sounds as if it applied only to the hand. But it applies to the heart, as we can see from the Ninth and the Tenth Commandment, which prohibit evil desires of the heart.

A sermon on the Law which you deliver from your pulpit, to be a proper preaching of the Law, must measure up to these requirements: There is to be no ranting about abominable vices that may be rampant in the congregation. Continual ranting will prove useless. People may quit the practises that have been reproved, but in two weeks they will have relapsed into their old ways. You must, indeed, testify with great earnestness against transgressions of God's commandments, but you must also tell the people: "Even if you were to quit your habitual cursing, swearing, and the like, that would not make you Christians. You might go to perdition for all that. God is concerned about the attitude of your heart." You may explain this matter with the utmost composure, but you must state it quite plainly.

Let me illustrate. You may say: "Listen; when God says: 'Thou shalt not kill,' that does not mean that you are no murderers when your hand has slain no one, when you have not assaulted any one like a highway robber, nor put his life in jeopardy. Do not think that you have kept the Fifth Commandment if you have refrained from such outward acts. By no means; the Law aims at the heart, at the spirit in man." If you say merely in passing: "The Law is spiritual," the people will not catch the drift of your speech. You must explain this matter to them quite thoroughly. If you do this, you will be handling a sharp knife that cuts into the life of people, and your hearers will go home dazed. From the effect of your preaching they will go down on their knees at home and make this self-confession: "I am not as God would have me be. I shall have to become a different person."

Rom. 3, 20 we read: By the Law is the knowledge of sin. God does not tell you to preach the Law in order thereby to make men godly. The Law makes no one godly; but when it begins to produce its proper effects, the person who is feeling its power begins to fume and rage against God. He hates the preacher who has shouted the Law into his heart, and he feels that he cannot slip off its coils. Where this has happened, you may hear people say: "We shall never again go to that church. Why, that preacher strikes terror into my soul. I prefer to attend the services of the Rev. So-and-so. He makes you feel good. While listening to him, you discover what a good man you really are." Alas! in eternity these people will wish to take revenge on the preacher that preached them into perdition.

There was nothing pleasant, nothing comforting, at Sinai. On the previous day, Moses had announced to the people that God was going to come to them. He did come with thunder and lightning. At early dawn a terrible tempest swept up from the horizon. Finally, the mountain began to quake, and the people were thrown into a still greater fright by this trembling of the mountain. Flames of fire shot skyward; dense clouds of smoke began to form. Suddenly a loud trumpet began to blare terribly, hurling its echoes like thunderclaps through the valleys that start from the sides of mountain and causing every one to shake with dread. But the climax of this terrible phenomenon came when the people heard the voice of Jehovah reciting to them the Ten Commandments with their regular refrain of Thou shalt! Thou shalt! Thou shalt! Moreover, the Speaker tells them: "I, the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children," etc. Ex. 20, 5. Everywhere in the camp of Israel people went to pieces from dread and fright.

Do you think that the coming of this terrible tempest just on that day was an accident? Did not Moses have to set up a barrier around the mountain already on the preceding day lest anybody approach the mountain? Did he not issue a warning to the people telling them that they would drop dead if they crossed the barrier? In the wild tumult of the next day the people understood the truth of the warning; for no one could have come out alive from that fearful commotion. Only Moses was permitted to approach the mountain, under the protecting hand of God.

By this spectacle God has indicated to us how we are to preach the Law. True, we cannot reproduce the thunder and lightning of that day, except in a spiritual way. If we do, it will be a salutary sermon when the people sit in their pews and the preacher begins to preach the Law in its fulness and to expound its spiritual meaning. There may be many in the audience who will say to themselves, "If that man is right, I am lost."

Some, indeed, may say: "That is not the way for an evangelical minister to preach." But it certainly is; he could not be an evangelical preacher if he did not preach the Law thus. The Law must precede the preaching of the Gospel, otherwise the latter will have no effect. First comes Moses, then Christ; or: First John the Baptist, the forerunner, then Christ. At first the people will exclaim, How terrible is all this! But presently the preacher, with shining eyes, passes over to the Gospel, and then the hearts of people are cheered. They see the object of the preacher's preceding remarks: he wanted to make them see how awfully contaminated with sins they were and how sorely they needed the Gospel.

For your catechizing you must adopt the same method. When explaining the Law, do not mingle Gospel elements with your catechization, except in the conclusion. Even little children have to pass through these experiences of anguish and terror in the presence of the Law. The reason why so many imagine that they can pass for really good Christians is because their parents reared

them to be self-righteous Pharisees; they never made them aware of the fact that they are poor, miserable sinners. A person may have fallen into the most dreadful sins; but if he has been brought up properly, he says to himself when he hears the Law preached: "Surely I am an awful sinner!" A Pharisee who hears the same sermon may not repeat that confession, though he may have fallen into far greater sins.

The conversion of Pharisees is a far more difficult task than that of a person who acknowledges his sin. That was the deepest corruption of the Jews in the days of Christ, and it is that of the papists in our time. The Jews had mingled Gospel elements with the Law by telling the people: "If you do not actually slay somebody, you are not a murderer. If you do not commit manifest fornication, you are not guilty of adultery." Even concupiscence was declared a natural sensation. The papists say the same. When forced to admit that in the exposition of the Law by *Christ* some things are named that cannot be classified with gross acts contrary to the Law, they claim that these things are meant merely as good counsels of Christ, which may be adopted by those who strive for an exceptionally exalted place in heaven. The good works resulting from following these good counsels of Christ they call supererogatory.

In his comment on the words of Christ: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill," etc., *Luther* says (St. L. Ed. VII, 429 f.): "Christ takes up some of the Ten Commandments for the purpose of explaining them properly. He shows that the Pharisees and scribes, when teaching the Law, did not push their explanation and inculcation beyond the literal meaning of the commandments and made them applicable only to gross, external acts. For instance, in the Fifth Commandment (which He introduces first) they considered no more than the word *kill*, which they interpreted to mean actual slaying; and they allowed the people to stick to the notion that nothing else is forbidden in this commandment. Moreover, in order to escape the charge of manslaughter for delivering a person to the magistrates to be condemned to death, as they delivered Christ to the pagan Pontius Pilate, they framed a pretty pretense for keeping their own hands from being sullied with blood: they urged their ceremonial purity and sanctity to the point of refusing to enter the governor's palace and forcing Pilate against his will to kill Jesus. John 18, 28ff. Later, still pretending perfect purity and innocence, they even rebuked the apostles for preaching Christ and charged them with the intention of bringing 'this man's blood' upon them. Acts 5, 28. They meant to say: Not we, but the heathen, killed Christ. A similar trick is recorded regarding King Saul in 1 Sam. 18, 25ff. He was nursing a grudge against David and would have liked to kill him. But since he wished to pass for a holy man, he planned to do the killing not with his own hand, but to send him against the Philistines, who, he hoped, would slay him. Thus *his* hand would be innocent of murder!"

What the Jews accepted of the Fifth Commandment was the more literal and crass meaning of the terms. The teachers told the people: "If you omit such and

such acts, you will pass for such as have well complied with the Fifth Commandment.” These famous doctors, who made their boast of the Law, had emptied the Law of its contents and retained the mere shell. Our modern rationalists are doing the same. Their aim is merely to preserve the reputation of probity in their lives, hence, not to rush into abominable vices of which any decent citizen would have to be ashamed. Upright conduct, too, is the sole object of their preaching. Even so-called Christian preachers are found to do this.

The practise of the Pharisees has been taken up by the papists. Papists and Pharisees resemble one another as closely as two eggs. The papists, when handing heretics over to the magistrates, declare: “*Ecclesia not sitit sanguinem*, that is, The Church does not thirst for blood. True, many of our heretical enemies have been slain. However, it was not we who did that, but the magistrates.” But if the magistrates refused to do it, they were excommunicated by the Church. Thus the papists want to wash their hands of the blood of the martyrs. But they will not succeed; some day they will have to appear before God stained with the damning witness of this blood. The case of the Jews is similar. Had they known the spiritual meaning of the Law, they would also have acknowledged: “Yes we are the ones who killed Christ; for it was we who cried, ‘Crucify, crucify Him!’”

Luther proceeds: “Behold here the pretty sanctity of Pharisees, which can whitewash itself and retain the reputation of godliness, provided it does not employ its own hand for killing, though the heart is filled with wrath, hatred, and envy and conceals malignant and murderous intrigues, while the mouth spouts forth curses and blasphemies. Of the same stripe is the sanctity of our papists, who have become past masters in these tricks. To guard their sanctity against censure and not to be bound by the Word of Christ, they found a fine subterfuge in the twelve [evangelical] counsels which they extracted from the teaching of Christ. They claimed that not all that Christ had taught was of the nature of a command and a necessary requisite [for discipleship], but some of His teachings were meant as a *good counsel*, the following of which was left to everybody’s discretion. These counsels were to be adopted by those who wished to achieve some especial merit before others. For the average person these counsels were a superfluous teaching that he could well do without. When you asked them their reason for framing these counsels from the teaching of Christ and how they proved their case, they would say: Well, you see it would be an excessive burdening of the Christian law (*nimis onerativum legis Christianae*); in other words, it would make Christianity too onerous an affair if all teachings of Christ were to be taken as actual commands. That is what the theologians of Paris unblushingly published in the treatise they directed against me. Forsooth, here we have some smart reasoning: being kind to your neighbor and not forsaking him in distress, as you would wish that people should treat you, that is to be an over-great burden. And inasmuch as they deem it too onerous, they decree that it shall not be regarded as a command, but as a matter left to the option of such as would be glad to do it. Those, however, who are unwilling to do it are not to be burdened with it. That is the trick of directing Christ’s speech, lording it over His

Word and construing its meaning to suit our fancy. But He will not permit Himself to be cheated thus, nor will He revoke the verdict which He has laid down when He said: Except you have a better kind of godliness to show, heaven will be closed against you, and you will be damned; or as He expresses it in a later statement: If you say to your brother, Thou fool, you shall be in danger of hell-fire. From this we can readily gather whether He offered counsels or issued commands.”

Christ says: “If any man will sue thee at the law and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.” The papists construe these words thus: “True, Christ did say that, but His words are merely evangelical counsels. If the question is how to get to heaven, you have to keep the Law. But if your object is to climb to a high place in heaven, you must carry out these counsels.”

In his *Chapters in Theology (Locī Theol., Part II, fol. 104)* Chemnitz enumerates these counsels. By the way, the supererogatory works resulting from following these counsels, you know, are the treasure from which the Pope distributes his indulgences. All told, there are twelve counsels: 1. *Voluntary poverty*. The words of Christ: “Sell that thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven,” Matt. 19, 21, are understood by the papists as being merely a good counsel. In their view this counsel is followed by those who enter a monastery. 2. *Celibacy*. This counsel the papists extract from Matt. 19, 12: “There are some eunuchs which were so born from their mother’s womb; and there are some eunuchs which were made eunuchs by men; and there be eunuchs which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.” “Behold,” they say, “our monks and nuns have adopted this good counsel.” Or they put it this way: “They lead a life of chastity.” 3. *Unconditional obedience* to the superior of an order. This good counsel, too, is followed by monks and nuns.

4. *Taking revenge*. It seems almost beyond belief that any one should arise in the Church and declare the divine command not to take revenge to be merely a good counsel. That amounts to saying: You might revenge yourself, but if you decline to do so, that is a splendid good work. 5. *Patiently suffering insult*. 6. *Giving alms*. 7. *Refraining from swearing*. 8. *Avoiding opportunities to commit sin*. This is awful! It is not necessary, then, to avoid all opportunities for sinning; but if you do so, you climb to the top of perfection! 9. *Having a right intention in whatever you do*. This would mean that, no matter what prompts you to do a good work, it is in every case a good work in the sight of God. But if you are guided by a right motive, you are an exceptionally saintly person. 10. *Doing what Christ says in Matt. 23, 3: “They say and do not,” and in Matt. 7, 5: “First cast out the beam out of thine own eye.”* 11. *Not being concerned about temporal affairs*. In the view of papists this, too, is merely a good counsel. 12. *Admonishing a brother*. Imagine, this is not to be regarded as a real duty, not being a part of the Law!

You can see what an abominable perversion of the Law has been perpetrated by the papists. Verily, they have dissipated the inmost spirit of the Law. They imagine that it would be asking too much if everybody were required to obey all these teachings of Christ. Of course, all cannot enter a cloister. If they did, who would provide bread and meat? No, indeed; that would be asking too much! Oh, what an abomination!

The Jesuits came forward with the proclamation: Heretofore the poor Christians have been unduly oppressed with moral precepts. Hence we, the Jesuits, have formed a society for relieving Christians of the most grievous moral precepts. And they actually put their plan in operation, with this happy result that according to their ethical standards the most infamous scoundrel can still be a good Christian. Their moral code is the reverse of the Decalog: a person may commit the most horrible abominations, provided he does so from a good intention. He may poison his father if he has the good intention of becoming his heir. However, this entire ethical system of the papists and Jesuits has been overthrown by the words of Christ: "Whoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell-fire." This means that any one who fails to fulfil the Law in its spiritual meaning deserves to perish.

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