

Law & gospel both necessary

Scripture leads us to God in fear, in love



The Bible functions as *law* when it causes us to fear God, and it functions as *gospel* when it causes us to love God.

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When Lutherans talk about Scripture as “law and gospel,” we are referring to the effect or impact of the Bible on human lives.

This month, on March 15, we will read the story of God giving the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther discusses each of the Ten Commandments by saying, “We are to fear and love God, so that”

It may be helpful to think of law and gospel this way: the Bible functions as *law* when it causes us to fear God, and it functions as *gospel* when it causes us to love God. When we do both—fear and love God—we are able to tackle all the “so that’s” included in Luther’s catechism.

The Bible speaks words that accuse us and convict us of sin: these words function as law and cause us to fear God. Although we know God is good, we should realize that God treats sin with severity—judging and punishing us to bring us to repentance and righteousness. This is good. But it isn’t pleasant: It is fearful.

But the Bible also speaks words that convey God’s grace and forgiveness to us, comforting us and giving us hope: these words function as gospel and cause us to love God.

As you listen to the Scripture this month, think about each lesson in these terms: “What does this ‘word of God’ do to me?”

We will definitely hear accusing words. We’ll hear Jesus calling his followers to deny themselves and take up their crosses (Mark 1:16-20). This is a call to make sacrifices—to give up things up for the sake of Christ and others.

Many of us may be giving up something for Lent, but Jesus is talking about more than video games or chocolate. Have any of us really denied ourselves to embrace the lives of discipleship he has in mind?

And, as if that isn’t enough, the very next week we will be confronted with the fearsome image of Jesus with a whip, standing in the

temple and denouncing religion that is just a commercial enterprise (John 2:13-22).

But this month is also filled with texts of promise and hope. We read the stories of God’s covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17) and with Abraham (Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16). Both of these texts are accompanied by New Testament lessons that explain how they apply to Christians (1 Peter 3:18-22; Romans 4:13-25). There is profound good news in these lessons: through baptism we are saved and by faith we are made right with God.

Best of all, perhaps, we will hear about the good news of God’s kingdom that Jesus proclaimed (Mark 1:14-15) and we will hear the beloved passage that Luther called “the gospel in a nutshell” (John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ...”).

Of course, I don’t know how any one of these passages will strike *you*. No text of Scripture is always law to all people, nor is any text always gospel. The Ten Commandments, again, are a good example. The very first commandment says, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). Is that law or gospel? There are times in my life when I want to put other things ahead of God—then this text accuses me and convicts me of my sin. But there are also times when I feel overwhelmed by all sorts of things that demand my allegiance and seek to control me—then I find it good news to be reminded that there is only One to whom I need to answer in the end. Law or gospel? For me, this one is law *and* gospel!

This month’s lessons reveal a God who is demanding, a God who won’t settle for less than what is absolutely best for us. This God is fearful. But I love this fearful God. Don’t you? □

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