



CENTER FOR STEWARDSHIP

Your Story - Living Submissively: The Place of the Law in the Christian Life

GOAL OF THE STUDY

Few tensions are more foundational to our Lutheran way of thinking theologically than the distinction between law and gospel. The law kills, and the gospel makes alive. The law shows our sin, and the gospel shows our Savior. There is nothing to discuss. The basics are clear. But, it may be the case that our fundamental duality gets in the way of thinking clearly about what it means to live a life of faithful discipleship. Indeed, this lesson will offer an argument that the old stewardship axiom, “all giving must be motivated by the gospel,” though well intended, is simply wrong and the cause of much “sanctified mischief.”

It will be helpful to review for the participants the theological definition of the law; the initial questions should provide opportunity for such a discussion. The

most succinct and useful definition is found in the Formula of Concord: “The law is a divine teaching in which the righteous, unchanging will of God revealed how human beings were created in their nature, thoughts, words, and deeds to be pleasing and acceptable to God.” (FC V, SD, 17 KW, 584), and even more briefly, “the word ‘law’ has one single meaning, namely the unchanging will of God, according to which human beings are to conduct themselves in this life.” (FC VI, SD, 15 KW, 589). Noteworthy about this understanding of the law is that it contains no intimation that the law is somehow negative or inherently oppressive. Indeed, quite the opposite is the case. Nevertheless, there is a high likelihood that at least some participants in your study will be suspicious of the law and its role in their life of discipleship.

ANSWERS

- 1 In these verses, Paul is doing what we expect by establishing the contrast between two ways of being right before God, and two ways, then, of approaching all of life. One can live according to the old way of the law or according to the newness of Christ and the Spirit. In other words, it is the choice between works righteousness by a life of obedience to the law, and justification by God’s work through Christ in the Spirit. Note this: to be released from the law is to be freed from having to keep the law (the old letters) to secure salvation. The sheer joy of such release should animate every believer with eagerness to bear God’s fruit.
- 2 The problem is not the law, but sin that fails to uphold the law. In these verses, Paul illustrates the second function of the law. Like a mirror, the law shows us the reality of who we are. In the glaring light of the

law, it becomes obvious that we are not as we should be, and that we fall short of God’s will. In a sense, knowing the law makes us greater sinners, because we are compelled to see ourselves for what we are; the sin is impossible to miss. Of course, it is also true that due to our perverse natures, the very thing we are told to do is the thing we refuse to do, and vice versa. In that sense, the law also serves to promote the spread of sin; again, this is a function of our sinfulness and not an inherent property of the law.

- 3 Obviously, the problem is not with the law; it is after all simply the will of God, and there is nothing negative about the will of God. The problem is sin. The problem is always sin. Given our sinful nature, the problem is with us, and not with God’s law. Taking Paul’s view seriously, we should see the law of God as a great gift and an asset to help us learn what

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it means to know and to do the will of God while we live as creatures in this world.

- 4 In American culture, freedom is a word particularly laden with meaning. It is understood as freedom from constraint, freedom from coercion, liberty to do as one pleases, or liberty to pursue individual wishes and dreams. Freedom means nothing can stop you from enjoying your “inalienable rights,” and no one can challenge your choices to live as you choose. Of course, such license to do whatever one’s heart desires is a figment even in America. The rule of law and the competing “rights” of other individuals, limit the liberty to do as one chooses. Still, freedom as release from restraint is an enduring ideal in the American mind. In Paul’s battle with the Judaizers, the threat was the false teaching that real Christianity meant obedience to the whole of Mosaic law. Thus, Paul’s exhortation is for the Galatians to reject this new imposition of slavery—a slavery they might readily embrace under the delusion that they were achieving a fuller and better form of faith. The real threat, as Paul makes clear in earlier chapters of his letter, is to the gospel of grace itself.
- 5 Legalisms are never in short supply—from tithing to Bible reading, from doctrinal fidelity to serving the poor—any good thing can be reduced to a faith-strangling legalism. The cross is the glory and comfort of believers; believers readily appreciate this fact. Less recognized is the sense in which the cross is a scandal and cause of offense for those who would contribute something to their own salvation and standing before God. The cross absolutely excludes all other claims on God’s favor or attention. If circumcision or any other legalistic action can add to justification, then the cross is meaningless.
- 6 “Called” echoes the doctrine of election. The foundation of Christian faith is God’s activity on behalf of sinful, fallen humanity, and this divine activity began before time with God’s sovereign choice of his own people. To be called to freedom should not, then, be construed as a separate call from the call to faith. Therefore, it is right to think of faith and freedom as aspects of the same truth. To have faith in Christ is to have freedom from the burden of fulfilling the law or fearing its condemnation. Freedom is being justified through faith in Jesus Christ alone.
- 7 It seems clear that for the Apostle Paul, the law and the keeping of the law—that is, the single commandment summation of the law—is bound tightly with freedom. Freedom is not license; freedom is living in love and serving one another. The text leads us to a much different concept of freedom than the one assumed in our culture. Freedom is living according to God’s will, in conformity with the plan and the design he established for human beings. When humans are living the way that God created them to live, in conformity with his will—his law—then they are free. To live at odds with the law of God is devastating and dehumanizing slavery. Freedom is obeying God’s law, summarized by the command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”
- 8 These poignant verses from Paul ring with the authenticity of one who knows well the unsettling reality of doing the very thing one hates, and later condemning that action as wicked. The term for this bifurcated human experience is *simul iustus et peccator*. Being at once holy saint by God’s declaration of grace and hopeless sinner by virtue of our recalcitrant fallen nature and self-serving actions, every believer knows the struggle described by Paul. It is some comfort, to recognize that we are not unique or unusual in our battle with the sinful self; yet, it is also sobering and somewhat dispiriting to realize that the struggle is one that has no end short of the grave.
- 9 This issue has generated a fair amount of debate. Some argue that Christians are free of the law’s punitive and restrictive use, and so conclude that for Christians, the first use of the law is excluded. Others, with a negative understanding of the law, consider any discussion of a third use of the law to be a betrayal of true Lutheran theology. Some have even rejected the second use of the law, arguing that since a believer is obviously in faith, further repentance is unnecessary. The scope of this study limits fuller discussion, but an argument from Scripture and the Confessions can be advanced that all three uses of the law are at work in the Christian disciple at virtually all times. The old man—even in the believer—is ever in need of constraint by any means, certainly including the threats of the law. Apt to fall, prone to self-delusion, and unable to see sin, the law’s second function is always a necessity for Christians. Finally, even as a new man, the law is present to teach and offer insight into what God would have the faithful disciple do.

ANSWERS cont.

- 10 Clearly, this is another loaded question. The intention is to encourage the idea that the law is not inherently negative, but actually the expression of God's will for how his people are to live within creation. Since our old man always in need of the law to curb behavior, perhaps we should re-think the assertion that the law has nothing to do with giving or with any good works. The taint of sin makes the gospel of Christ essential for the doing of any good work. Yet, the motive behind a particular work does not make it good; it is only that the grace of Christ extends not only to the Christian but also to his works. Then and only then is a work good. Thus, if a believer does the "right thing" with less than exemplary motives (out of fear, to avoid an unpleasant consequence, or even to look good to others), when that work conforms to the law and is redeemed by Christ's forgiveness, even that action can be understood rightly as a good work. It should be clear that this way of thinking about creatureliness, faith, forgiveness, and the law allows a great deal of latitude in determining what are right motives for doing good works.