

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. Martin Eden

Pentecost 7
Saturday, July 6, 2024, at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, July 7, 2024, at 9:00 a.m.

“Law and Gospel”

Mark 6:1-13

As God’s people, we are faced with serious questions about how to best go about proclaiming God’s Word. This is something Jesus had to teach His disciples. There are many theories out there. This question is debated at seminaries and within churches all the time: How should you, and how many times should you confront your friends, neighbors, or loved ones concerning their lack of faith or sinful lifestyle? When does speaking to them about their lack of relationship with their Lord become no longer profitable for them or you?

Unfortunately, there is no clear answer. In the parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus says to leave the 99 and focus all of your energy and attention on finding the one lost sheep and carrying him back to where he belongs.

But then in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus gives us another model with which to work. He tells His disciples that “if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them.”

That is, if someone has rejected and stayed away from Christ and His Church, that person needs to understand that there are consequences for those actions, or lack of actions, as the case may be. The Lord tells His disciples to “shake the dust off your feet” so it is made clear to those who have rejected the Word of God that they have no part or fellowship with the believers.

The Lord has given us, basically, these two models to be guides for our actions: seeking the Lost Sheep and shaking the dust off your feet. Unfortunately, there is no handbook on how to best apply these models for each individual situation that arises. God leaves it up to each individual Christian to make that call as to which way is best to approach the friend or loved one in question.

It seems that the Lord has given us a Law approach and a Gospel approach – but not really. In probably his most well-known book: *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, C. F. W. Walther, one of the founding fathers of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod wrote: “Rightly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is the most difficult and the highest art of Christians in general and of theologians in particular.”¹

Walther wrote that if the Law has not yet caused the person to taste the bitterness of his sin, then the Gospel will be nothing but a pillow for his carnal mind; and he will continue in his sinful life and imagine that he will eventually land in heaven.²

Therefore, we do no favors for our friends and loved ones by glossing over their sins so that they never have to feel remorse, guilt, or shame for their sin. You become an enabler, and they never turn away from their sinful lifestyle. Everyone must taste the bitterness of sin. Only then will they appreciate the sweetness of the Gospel.

However, Walther also very rightly states: “the Word of God is not rightly divided [between Law and Gospel] when the person teaching it does not allow

¹Walther, C. F. W. *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1986, p.42.

²Ibid., p. 44.

the Gospel to have a general predominance in his teaching.”³ That is, if “shaking the dust off of your feet” is the way you react to most situations, there may be a problem.

I said earlier that it seems as if the Lord has given us a Law approach and a Gospel approach with which we are to deal with those who are lacking a good relationship with their Creator and Redeemer. However, it is not as simple as that. Both the Law and the Gospel are contained within the Word of God. To separate them and try to use one and not the other is a great error and misuse of God’s Word.

If the sweet words of the Gospel, the Good News of the forgiveness of sins won for us through Christ’s death and resurrection, is preached to those who have no remorse for their sinful life, they will remain comfortable in their sins, and they will never experience the joy of Christ in this life or the next.

Once again we turn to C. F. W. Walther who while instructing a group of young men studying to be pastors once said: “[In regard to those who have not been effected by the Law] since they had not become alarmed over their sins, it had not been possible for them to believe. For there will not be faith in a heart that has not first been terrified.”⁴ It is the Law that cleaves the heart and cuts us to the core. But this is done in love, because only when the sinful heart is rent asunder do we see the hand of God at work healing us and mending us back together.

Likewise, it is a grievous sin to preach the Law to sinners who are already terrified – to those who already know that they are poor, miserable sinners.⁵ It

³Ibid., p. 403.

⁴Ibid., p.278.

⁵Ibid., p. 101.

is these to whom nothing but the gentle words of the Gospel should be preached. They are the Lost Sheep that the Good Shepherd will carry home on His shoulders.

As was said before: to properly divide the Word of God in regard to Law and Gospel is the highest Christian art and the most difficult task. How many times should you confront your friends, neighbors, or loved ones concerning their lack of faith or sinful lifestyle? When does speaking to them about their lack of relationship with their Lord turn into nagging? There are no easy answers.

But don't beat yourself up if that person fails in their relationship with God. They are the one who has failed – not you. And don't pat yourself on the back too much if the Lord calls them to faith. As we confess in the words of Luther's Small Catechism, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel."

The Holy Spirit does the work. Your responsibility is for the Word of God to be active and held before them in what you say and do. I just try to be as little of a hinderance to the work of the Holy Spirit as possible. For any Christian, no better witness can be given than a lifetime of devotion to the Lord.

Like we heard with the prophet Ezekiel, "whether they hear or refuse to hear", your task is to hold the Word of God in front of them. Sometimes this means "shaking the dust off your feet" and sometimes it is offering the gentlest and most gracious words to that terrified lost sheep or the ones struggling with the thorn in the flesh. As God promises, God's Word of Law and Gospel will never return empty. Amen.