

“God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

(Romans 8:3-4)



God’s Word as Law and Gospel

In the Scripture passage above, the Apostle Paul illustrates two distinctive ways in which God’s Word acts on us — as “Law” and as “Gospel.” The Law has to do with the requirements and commandments of God, experienced as conditional expectations that require obedience. The Gospel, on the other hand, is the promise of what God has freely done for us, in the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. Both are the Word of God.

God uses Law and Gospel to accomplish different purposes, and each functions in a distinct way. Like the right and left hands, both work together. When God’s Word comes to us, it can serve either function.

The Distinction Between Law & Gospel

LAW
(Command)

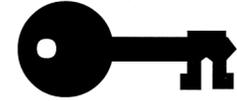


Type of Language:
Conditional

Example:
If (human action) ...
... then (divine action)

Functions of the Law:
Provides and Preserves Order
Restrains and Limits Evil
Creates Obedience
Accuses of Sin
Creates Fear
Kills

GOSPEL
(Promise)



Type of Language:
Unconditional

Example:
Because (divine action) ...
... therefore (divine action)

Functions of the Gospel:
Creates Faith and Trust
Provides Hope
Impels Love
Gives Life
Redeems
Saves

If a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. But the Scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.
(Galatians 3:21b-22)

I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”
(Romans 1:16-17)

Distinguishing Between the Two

Martin Luther said that the key to being a good theologian is to be able to distinguish between Law and Gospel. To be able to recognize the difference between the commands and promises of God is central to our hearing God's Word, and understanding how faith works in our lives.

Jesus said: "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." (Matthew 13:52)

The following illustration demonstrates how the same Word from God can be heard as both Law and Gospel:

Example: The First Commandment

"I am the Lord your God..., you shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:2-3)

Heard as the Law, this statement is the command: *"You **must** not put anything before your faith in God ... or else."* It serves the function of the Law by showing us how we should act toward God. It demonstrates the proper ordering of priorities in our lives, and promotes obedience. At the same time, this statement also serves function of the law by making us realize how often we do not keep God first in our lives. It demonstrates our sinful nature by pointing out our inability to trust in God.

Heard as a Gospel, this statement is a pure promise: *"I am the Lord your God, you **will** (shall) have no other gods before me."* It is the promise that no matter what, God is Lord of our lives. It assures us of what God can and will make happen in us by his grace.

The distinction between Law and Gospel is particularly important in understanding how we as human beings are saved by the gospel of Jesus Christ, apart from works of the law. It is not by obedience to commandments that we earn eternal life; it is by the free grace of God and what he accomplished for us on the Cross of Jesus Christ. Through the gospel message, God creates faith within us.

Further Reading:

Those interested in learning more from Scripture about the difference between Law and Gospel might want to consider reading the Apostle Paul's **Letter to the Galatians**. Paul uses many examples and illustrations to describe the difference between Law and Gospel, and shows how God uses them in our lives to bring us to faith.

SOLA

www.solapublishing.org

"What Does This Mean?" is an educational pamphlet ministry of Sola Publishing (© 2008 Rev. Steven E. King). Brochures in this series may be downloaded from www.solapublishing.org and reproduced for individual and congregational use. All Scripture citations are from the NRSV Bible.

Distinguishing Law and Gospel



Sola Publishing – Educational Series:

What Does This Mean?

*"The Word of God is living and active,
sharper than any two edged sword."*

(Hebrews 4:12 NRSV)