

The Law and The Promise

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ [Amen].

The primary text for our meditation this morning [or evening] is the epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians in the third chapter.

*Is the law then contrary to the promises of God?*¹

In his famous evening lectures, C.F.W. Walther, our first president of the LCMS, said, “The doctrinal contents of the entire Holy Scriptures, both of the Old and the New Testament, are made up of two doctrines differing fundamentally from each other, that is, the Law and the Gospel... Only he is an orthodox [aka right] teacher who not only presents all the articles of faith in accordance with Scripture, but also rightly distinguishes from each other the Law and the Gospel.”²

Simply put, the Bible is made up of both the Law which makes commands and the Gospel which offers promises; the Law which tells us what to do, and the Gospel which tells us what God is doing; the Law which kills and the Gospel which gives life. To teach, hear or study the Word of God correctly, to give true consolation to others in their time of need, and to keep the Word of God right in your own heart, you must, through the power of the Holy Spirit alone, properly distinguish the Law from the Gospel. Without this distinction, the Bible will appear to be full of contradictions. Without this distinction, “the Scripture will remain a sealed book.”³

Today in our Epistle and Gospel readings we see a prime example of how deadly a jumbling up of the Law and the Gospel can be. In our Epistle reading, we hear that when the Galatian Christians were ready to accept circumcision, thinking that having been begun by the Spirit they would be perfected through the Law, Paul reminded them that only through the promise by faith in Jesus Christ would anyone be saved:

*The Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.*⁴

Only through the Gospel, that is, the promise of Christ, only through His faithfulness into death and your receiving of that gracious gift through faith, can you gain the inheritance of life.

¹ Galatians 3:21.

² C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, “Thesis I and II,” (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Galatians 3:22.

The equation of Jesus plus the Law does not add up to eternal life. The equation of Jesus plus circumcision does not add up to eternal life. Jesus and good works do not equal life... Jesus—and Jesus alone—is life.

The curious thing then is the seemingly contradictory words we find in our Gospel reading from none other than Jesus himself.

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”⁵

...So if our epistle reading clearly teaches that the way of life is not through the observance of the Law, the question becomes, why on earth would Jesus tell the lawyer to do the law and he will live eternally? It’s obvious to say that this sounds like a contradiction... and Paul anticipates the Galatians’ and your thinking when he asks the question, which is the theme for today’s sermon,

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God?⁶

Many false teachers would want you, like the Galatians, to believe that God would never tell you to do something that you couldn’t do. So when Jesus says, “Do the law and you will live,” He’s telling you that you absolutely can fulfill the Law by loving God and your neighbor perfectly. But this false teaching avoids the words from our epistle reading and misunderstands the story of the Good Samaritan.

You see, the lawyer came to Jesus as a student of the Old Covenant. More than that, he came rooted in the false premise that the Law was given at Sinai so that man could have life... He came thinking that the Law itself gave to the recipient the power to keep it... And so he asks,

“What shall I do?”⁷

To his Law question, Jesus gives the Law answer,

“Do this, and you will live.”⁸

If you ask a Law question, don’t be surprised if you get a Law answer. If you want the blueprint for how to earn your way to heaven, here it is: Keep the Law. But pay close attention to

⁵ Luke 10:25-28.

⁶ Galatians 3:21.

⁷ Luke 10:25.

⁸ Luke 10:28.

the words of Jesus, because he doesn't say to the lawyer, "Try harder," and Paul doesn't say to the Galatians, "Circumcision should do the trick." Jesus says,

*"Do this and you will live."*⁹

And Paul says,

*"Every man who accepts circumcision is obligated to keep the whole law."*¹⁰

Nowhere then in the Word of God will you read, "Do your best." God never says, just try harder. He says,

"Do it. Do all of it. Love Me with your entire being and love your neighbor as yourself. Don't miss the mark once, and you will live."

But when you try to follow the Law down to the very letter, when you try to love God and love your neighbor perfectly, that's when you'll start to see what the Law actually asks of you... And asking questions like, "*who is my neighbor*"¹¹, won't offer any loopholes. It will only give the Law its full weight.

Eventually, you'll see that it's not just that you do the things that you shouldn't and that you don't do the things you should. It's not just that you so often pass by your neighbor in need or don't seek him out in the first place. It's not just that you have a few pet sins that you try and keep in check. The real issue is that you can't do the Law.

The real issue is that sin has so corrupted your being that on your own you are incapable of being the perfect loving neighbor that God requires you to be. The more that you try to live under the Law, the more you will see that you can't. The more you try and help your neighbor the more you will see how much he actually needs... and how much of that need you just can't seem to ever fulfill. The more you labor under the Law, the greater its weight will be on your back... Sooner or later the Law will prove that it cannot give you life. Or as Paul says to the Romans,

*the very commandment which promised life, proved to be death.*¹²

The Law does not give the power to keep the law... Yes, Jesus says

*"Do this, and you will live."*¹³

⁹ Luke 10:28.

¹⁰ Galatians 5:3.

¹¹ Luke 10:29.

¹² Romans 7:10

¹³ Luke 10:28.

But he never tells the lawyer that he can. Jesus doesn't say that in the Law you will be given the help you need to perfectly love God and perfectly love your neighbor. And so Paul, anticipating any frustration, tells you that this was not the purpose of the Law to begin with! He says,

*“Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise has been made.”*¹⁴

The Law was given to beat down sinners that they might have nowhere to turn except to Jesus Christ alone. It was given so that the Israelites would despair of themselves and be turned to the promises of God in faith... so that God's people, who were so often given to pride and idolatry, might wait on the promised offspring of Abraham. It was given to prepare the way for the coming Seed, Jesus Christ, through whom all nations would be blessed with the inheritance of eternal life.

The Law was given to force you to understand the reality of your situation. It was given to show you your lack of love so that you would see how much you need God's love. In our Gospel reading, the Law was spoken in full measure to the lawyer asking his Law question so that, when he despaired, he would be ready to receive the mercy of God.

With this right distinguishing of the Law, Jesus' words today, and the story of the Good Samaritan finally make sense.

*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.*¹⁵

Jesus teaches those who want to have life by the Law what the Law can ultimately do for you. When the man was left beaten and as good as dead on the road it was not the Law offered him life. No, the priest and the Levite, those two doers of the Law, partakers of God's Old Covenant, those two could not offer help to the man who was as good as dead. And no, it wasn't because they were jerks or because they were in a hurry. It wasn't because they hated the dying man, it was because they were pious men trying to follow the Law to the letter. The priest and

¹⁴ Galatians 3:19.

¹⁵ Luke 10:29-32.

the Levite pass by the man presumed dead because the Law forbids them to partake in the uncleanness of death... In Leviticus, chapters 21 and 22,

The Lord said to Moses, “Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them, ‘No one shall make himself unclean for the dead among his people, except for his closest relatives¹⁶ ... Whoever touches anything that is unclean through contact with a dead man¹⁷ ... the person who touches such a thing shall be unclean until the evening¹⁸ ... They shall therefore keep my charge, lest they bear sin for it and die thereby when they profane it: I am the Lord who sanctifies them.’ ”¹⁹

The priest and the Levite were trying to follow the Law. And because they were piously trying to follow it, they could not save the half-dead man. You see, the Law cannot give life. It couldn't give life to the dying man. It couldn't give life to the Galatians. And it can't give life to you.

No law was written that could give life.²⁰

As Paul says in our Epistle, because that was not the purpose of the Law. Those who seek to enter eternal life by the narrow door of the Law will soon find out that it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. Which is to say, it's impossible.

The Law imprisons everything under sin.²¹

The Law leaves you stripped, beaten and half dead on the side of the road. But that's not how the story ends, is it?

A Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him, bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, “Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.”²²

After sin has left you beaten and broken, after the Law has left you dead on the side of the road—that is when you are ready to receive the Samaritan. Because when the Law forbade the priest and the Levite to partake in the uncleanness of death, when the Law could not offer

¹⁶ Leviticus 21:1.

¹⁷ Leviticus 22:4.

¹⁸ Leviticus 22:6.

¹⁹ Leviticus 22:9.

²⁰ Galatians 3:21.

²¹ Galatians 3:22.

²² Luke 10:33-35.

life, that is when the true offspring of Abraham, the true seed of the promise, journeyed from His heavenly home to seek out the ones dead in their sins and trespasses. Jesus Christ is the Good Samaritan. Jesus Christ is the promised offspring of Abraham.

And so that is what Paul means when he says,

*“The inheritance comes by the promise.”*²³

You remember what the lawyer asked Jesus,

*“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”*²⁴

The lawyer asked how to get the inheritance. The inheritance is life itself, and that life comes to sinners not through the Law, but through the promise. Not through an intermediary like Moses, not through the priest or the Levite, but through God Himself. The inheritance comes through the promised Seed. Through Christ’s own journey to seek and save the lost, through his journey to the cross and grave, through his agonizing death and glorious resurrection, He has delivered God’s promise once given to Abraham to all those who receive him in faith. That is what Paul taught the Galatians, and that is what Jesus taught the lawyer: the inheritance was always by the promise. Life was always through the Gospel.

So what must you do to inherit eternal life? Nothing. Only have faith. And in the story of the Good Samaritan what we actually see is the perfect picture of faith. This story is primarily about how we receive the inheritance of eternal life through faith in the promise. To have faith is nothing more than to receive Jesus like the half dead man received the Samaritan. To have faith is to receive Christ who binds up your wounds, pours over you the healing oil of forgiveness, brings you to the inn of the Church and gives His pastor servants to bring you safety to the day of His return. Faith looks like a half dead man being nursed back to health.

So, having heard that the merciful work of Jesus is at the center of our Gospel reading today, we can return to our initial question from Paul:

*Is the law then contrary to the promises of God?*²⁵

With Jesus at the center the answer is obvious... *Certainly not!*²⁶

Both the Law and the promise have their own purpose.

²³ Galatians 3:18.

²⁴ Luke 10:25.

²⁵ Galatians 3:21.

²⁶ Galatians 3:21.

The law was given because of transgression.²⁷ The law was given to imprison everything under sin.²⁸

The Law was given to show you your actual reality. It was given to show you that, far from being a lover of God and a lover of your neighbor, you were no better than a dead guy on the side of the road. But just because the Law cannot save you that doesn't mean it's evil.

The Law has its purpose and it has its end. And whereas the end of the Law is death, the promise was given so that you might live eternally. So the Law is not contrary to the promises but it is lesser than the promises. As it was from the beginning, and as Paul reminded the Galatians, the Gospel always proves itself to be greater than the Law. The Gospel is greater than the Law, because only the Gospel can give life. The Law can show you what God wants, but only the Gospel can give it.

What is more, the Gospel is greater than the Law because not even the Law can annul God's promises. The Law cannot make God's promise to bless all nations through Abraham's offspring void. Neither the law, nor your sin, can change the fact that Jesus Christ, the promised seed of Abraham, has already died and risen for you.

As the Samaritan paid for the life of the man who fell among robbers with coins from his own pocket, so Jesus has already made payment by his precious blood for your new life in Him. He has sealed His last will and Testament and no power in heaven or on earth can take away your inheritance. Amen.

And the peace of God which passes all human understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. [Amen.]

2 Chronicles 28:8-15, Galatians 3:15-22, Luke 10:23-37

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²⁷ Galatians 3:19.

²⁸ Galatians 3:22.