

# The Distinction Between the Law and the Gospel

A Sermon by Martin Luther  
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Translated by Willard L. Burce

*Galatians 3:23-24. Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith....*

1. What St. Paul has in mind is this: That throughout Christendom preachers and hearers alike should teach and should maintain a clear distinction between the Law and the Gospel, between works and faith. He so instructed Timothy, admonishing him (2 Tim. 2:15) to "divide rightly the word of truth." Distinguishing between the Law and the Gospel is the highest art in Christendom, one that every person who values the name Christian ought to recognize, know, and possess. Where this is lacking, it is not possible to tell who is Christian and who is pagan or Jew. That much is at stake in this distinction.

2. That is why St. Paul strongly insists that among Christians these two doctrines, the Law and the Gospel, are to be well and truly separated from one another. Both of them are the Word of God: the Law (or the Ten Commandments) and the Gospel. Both were given by God: the Gospel originally in Paradise, the Law on Mt. Sinai. That is why it is so important to distinguish the two words properly and not mingle them together. Otherwise you will not be able to have or hold on to a correct understanding of either of them. Instead, just when you think you have them both, you will have neither.

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*For the German original of this sermon see either the Weimar (vol. 38, pp. 8-42) or the St. Louis edition (vol. 9, pp. 799-811) of Luther's works.*

3. Under the papacy the point was reached where neither the pope himself nor any of his scholars, cardinals, bishops, or universities ever knew what either Gospel or Law might be. They never tasted, nor did they let it be known in any of their books, how the one is to be distinguished from the other—how the doctrine of the Law should or could be kept apart from the Gospel. For that reason their faith is, to say the best, purely and simply a Turk's faith which stands solely upon the bare letter of the Law and on outward acts of doing or not doing, such as "You shall not kill" and "You shall not steal." They take the view that the Law is satisfied if a man does not use his fist for homicide, does not steal anyone's property, and the like. In short, they believe that sort of external piety is a righteousness that prevails before God, etc. But such doctrine and faith are false and wrong, even though the works performed are themselves good and have been commanded by God. For the Law demands a righteousness much higher than one based on external virtues and piety; while the Gospel of grace and the forgiveness of sins is totally knocked to the ground by their doctrine. For however much not stealing or not committing homicide is behavior that is right and mandated by the Law, it is still nothing more than a piety of the Gentiles which fails to attain the righteousness demanded by the Law. Far less can it be equated with the forgiveness of sins that the Gospel teaches and proclaims.

4. It is therefore urgent that these two words, different in kind, be rightly and properly distinguished. Where that is not done, neither the Law nor the Gospel can be understood, and consciences must perish in blindness and error. For the Law has its terminus, defining how far it is to go and what it is to achieve, namely, to terrify the impenitent with the wrath and displeasure of God and drive them to Christ. Likewise the Gospel has its unique office and function: to preach the forgiveness of sins to troubled consciences. Let doctrine then not be falsified, either by mingling these two into one, or by mistaking the one for the other. For the Law and the Gospel are indeed both God's word; but they are not the same kind of doctrine. It is like the word of God in Exodus 20:12, "You shall honor your father and your mother," and the one found in Ephesians 6:4, "You fathers, bring up your children in the training and instruction of the Lord." Since the two words do not address the same office or the same persons, what chaos would follow if they were thrown together on the grounds that "it is all God's Word"! The son would then want to be father and the father would want to be the son. Mother would want to be daughter and daughter to be the mother. But that lacks rhyme or reason and is intolerable. The father should do what God has assigned and commanded him to do. Likewise let the son attend to his calling. In

this way duties and functions are properly distinguished and distributed. So, too, it is fitting for the mother in a family to bear children and nurse them and bring them up; and for a husband to provide for his household and servants and manage them faithfully, but not to bear children or take over the housekeeping, attending, etc. When someone begins to interfere in the office assigned to another, or tries to take it over and annex it to his own, what kind of chaos and turmoil does that not soon produce? The word must be rightly distinguished, so that each person looks after what he has been called and assigned to do, stays with it, and goes no farther. That way he will not go astray.

5. It was nothing else than this that brought Thomas Münzer into such terrible trouble. He read in the books of the Kings how David slew the wicked with the sword; how Joshua destroyed the Canaanites, Hittites, and other godless peoples who were dwelling in the land of Canaan; etc. Finding that word in the Scripture, he drew from it the conclusion that we must all do the same. We must crush kings and ruling princes, because we have this example. But where Münzer fell short was in failing to distinguish the word correctly. Otherwise he would have said to himself: Yes, David fought wars. But am I David? The word that told David to fight wars is not addressed to me. He received the command to make war and slay kings; I have received the command to preach. Münzer should have left fighting alone and gone into the pulpit and taught the pure Gospel as Christ commanded: "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation" [Mark 16:15]. Had he done that, he would not have gotten into such terrible doctrine and uproar. To David and not to Münzer it was said: "You shall protect the righteous, smite the wicked with the sword, maintain peace, etc." But if David would neglect those duties and go intruding into the priestly office, and if I would drop preaching and take up the sword, and so mix everything up, what kind of prize government and high art would we not then have? For the barnyard, perhaps.

6. Therefore I say it again: Properly separating the Law and the Gospel from one another is a very high art, since it is necessary to do the same also with the commandments (all of which are included under the one word "Law"). We have to distinguish the one from the other, unless we want everything to be completely and totally mixed up—and because there is still failure and defect even when every right and proper distinction has been made.

7. Hence it is a serious misunderstanding, and indeed foolishness, when somebody pleads: "It is the word of God, it is the word of God, therefore it is right, etc." The Word of God is not all of the same kind; it is of diverse kinds. The Law is a different word from the Gospel.

Likewise the laws or commandments are not all of the same kind. The word of God, "Protect the righteous, punish the wicked," does not apply to me. Nor does the word: "Bear children, nurse them, sweep, attend," etc., which applies alone to the women. Likewise: "Thou shalt preach, thou shalt administer the Sacraments," belongs not to female but to male persons who have been called to that office.

8. Our "enthusiasts" know nothing at all of this distinction—neither how to make it, nor what the distinction is in theory or in practice. One law is held up in opposition to another on the grounds that the one is just as much law as the other. When dealing with laws, however, it is necessary to separate them one from another and to pay proper attention to the persons at whom the law is directed. How much more important is it, then, to make a distinction between the Law and the Gospel. Therefore whoever knows well this art of dividing the Law from the Gospel should be given a place at the front of the room and be called a doctor of Holy Scripture. For it is impossible to make this distinction without the Holy Spirit. I experience in myself, and I see every day in others, how hard it is to separate the doctrines of the Law and the Gospel from one another. In this the Holy Spirit has to be the master and teacher, or no person on earth would be able to understand or teach the distinction. Hence no papist, no false Christian, no "enthusiast" is able to divide Law and Gospel from one another, especially when it comes to defining what each of them is.

We should understand "Law" to mean nothing else than God's word and command, in which He directs us what to do and what not to do, and demands from us our obedience or "work." This is easy to understand as a statement of what gives the Law its character, but very difficult in terms of its purpose and its limits. The individual laws or commandments, dealing with the works that God requires of all people severally on the basis of what they are, their social position, their office, age, and other circumstances, are of many kinds. They tell every human being what God has laid upon him and requires of him in keeping with his nature and assigned office. The woman shall attend to the children, permit the head of the household to take the lead, etc. That is her commandment. A servant is to be obedient to his master and do whatever else belongs to the office of a servant. Likewise a maid has her directive. The overall law, however, which applies to us all as human beings, is this (Matt. 22:39): "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," counsel and help him in his need, whatever it may be. If he hungers, feed him; if he is naked, clothe him; and whatever else of that sort there is. That means giving the Law its rightful boundaries, and marking it off from the Gospel: the Law, in name and in fact, is that which presses us to do our works.

On the other hand, the Gospel or the faith is a doctrine or word of God that does not require our works. It does not command us to do anything. On the contrary, it bids us merely to accept the offered grace of forgiveness of sins and eternal life and let it be given to us. It means that we do nothing; only receive, and allow ourselves to be given what has been granted to us and handed to us in the Word: that God promises and allows His servants to tell you, "I am giving you this and this, etc." For example, in Baptism, which is not my doing or my work, but God's Word and work, God speaks to me and says: "Stop right here; I baptize you, I wash you from all your sins; accept it; it is for you." If now you let yourself be baptized, what more are you doing than receiving and accepting God's free gift? So this now is the difference between the Law and the Gospel. The Law presses us to do what we are supposed to do; it demands that we do our duty towards God and our neighbor. In the Gospel, on the other hand, we are summoned to a gift of alms, to a rich distribution of charity, where we are to receive and accept God's favor and eternal salvation.

9. Hence this difference is easily to be noted. The Gospel bids us come to God's gift and present, to His help and His salvation. We just hold out the beggar's bag and let it be given us. The Law on the other hand gives us nothing; it only demands and takes from us. So now there is this pair, giving and taking, widely separate from one another. When something is given to me as a gift, I do nothing towards it. I accept it, and receive it, and let it be given to me. Conversely, when I carry out in my calling what I have been commanded to do—for example, counsel and help my neighbor—I am not receiving anything, but am giving something to another, whom I serve. In this way the Law and the Gospel are distinguished in their essential character: the one promises, the other commands. The Gospel gives and that means that we receive. The Law issues demands and says: "Thou shalt." It is like when a prince or a liege lord presents his property to a nobleman. The nobleman does nothing; it is not his work; it is a bequest by the prince. But when he mounts his horse to serve his lord or to attend him at court, then he is doing something.

10. Hence this pair of doctrines are to be widely divided from one another, but in the Spirit. For the devil, to torment hearts, does not let us remain with what the Law's words say, or with its goal. He does allow it to happen that something is done or performed; but he leads us away from what we were commanded to do, to something else allegedly Higher and Better. He does the same sort of thing in regard to the Law's purpose, constantly pointing away from the right goal to a false one, for which the Law purportedly was given. In calling for this or that to be done (e.g., You shall not steal, You shall not kill,

etc.), the Law is speaking of a kind of doing that by its nature and definition proceeds from the heart and the Spirit. If now the work that is done is not of that kind, the outcome is either hypocrites (who understand the Law to mean external behavior and, if they have such behavior or work, count themselves as blameless and righteous), or people who totally despair. The Gospel, for its part, offers comfort, saying: "Look, Christ is your Treasure; your Gift; your Savior, Help, and Comfort"! When the heart now comes to this fork in the road between the Law and the Gospel, and sees grace here and guilt there, promise here and command there, giving here and demanding there, it refuses to go ahead; it balks. It can neither fight off the Law, nor take hold of grace. The reason is, it does not know how to divide these two words, the Law and the Gospel, from one another.

11. Where the conscience has now taken a hit, so that it well and truly feels sin, is held fast in the grips of death, is burdened down by war, plague, poverty, disgrace, and similar disasters, and when in that case the Law announces: "You belong to death; you are damned; I demand this and this from you which you have not done and cannot do"; where the Law, I say, lays in with its blows and terrorizes a person with the fear of death and hell and despair, then it is high time to know how to divide the Law and the Gospel from one another, and to show each to its proper place. Here let him divide who can; this is the critical time for dividing.

12. To this moment belongs what St. Paul says: "Before faith came, we were confined under the Law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed, etc." Let a Christian know, he says, how to make a distinction between the Law and the Gospel, between works and faith, especially in regard to their goals and the messages they bear. Let him counter the Law in this way: Yes, you demand much, and you consign to damnation those who are not able to give what you require. But are you also aware how far your regime is supposed to go? Have you forgotten that its time has a set limit, as St. Paul says: When faith comes the Law should cease, make no further demands, terrorize and condemn no longer?

13. Whoever does not know this or pays no attention to it loses the Gospel, and never comes to faith. That is what the devil is doing through the "enthusiasts." He mixes together Law and Promise, faith and works; tortures poor consciences; and allows them to view neither the Law nor the Gospel with proper distinction. He drives and hunts people into the Law, and lays a net for them that bears the name: "I must do this; I must not do that." If at this point I fail to distinguish well Moses and Christ, I cannot be free, I cannot escape, I must end in despair.

14. But if I knew how to divide the Law and the Gospel rightly, there would be no need for despair. I could say: Has God given us only one kind of word, namely, the Law? Has He not also commanded the Gospel of grace and forgiveness of sins to be preached? Yes, if the conscience raises its voice where there is no faith in the promise, the Law quickly presses its claim: You were commanded to do this and this; you have not done it; therefore you must pay the penalty. In that kind of struggle and death agony, it is high and urgent time for faith to play the part of a man, to stand up without flinching, confront the Law, and address it with calm courage: My friend Law, are you the only Word of God? Is not the Gospel, too, the Word of God? Has the Promise come to an end? Has God's mercy stopped? Or have the two—Law and Gospel, merit and grace—now been concocted into a stew and become one thing? We will not have a God who can no longer give the Law; be assured of that. So, too, do we want the Law to be unmingled with the Gospel. Allow us, then, to have this distinction without let or hindrance: that you press for duty and justice, while the Gospel points us to pure grace and gift.

15. If the Law then accuses me of failing to do this or that, of being a law-breaker and a sinner in God's record book of guilt, I have to confess that it is all true. But what it says after that, "Therefore you are condemned"—that I must not concede, but resist it with firm faith and say: "According to the Law, which reckons up my guilt, I am indeed a poor, condemned sinner. But I appeal from the Law to the Gospel; because God has given another word that is higher than the Law. That word is the Gospel, which gives us, as a free gift, God's grace, the forgiveness of sins, eternal righteousness, and life. It gives you pardon and absolution from your terrors and damnation; it assures me that all guilt has been paid for by the Son of God, Jesus Christ Himself. That is why it is so necessary that we know how to handle and steer both words properly, and watch carefully that they do not become mixed up with each other.

16. For God gave us these two different words, the Law and the Gospel—the one as well as the other. Each of the two bears His command. The Law is to demand perfect righteousness from everyone. The Gospel is to give the righteousness demanded by the Law to those who do not have it (i.e., to all people) by grace, as a gift. Whoever then has failed to satisfy the Law and is in captivity in sin and death, let him turn from the Law to the Gospel. Let him believe the preaching of Christ: that He is truly the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; that He has reconciled His heavenly Father; that, as a totally free gift and by grace, He grants eternal righteousness, life, and salvation to all who believe it. Let him hold fast to this preaching

alone; let him call upon Christ, beg for grace and the forgiveness of sins, and firmly believe, for this great gift will be grasped alone by faith. Let him do that; and as he believes, so he will have.

17. This then is the correct distinction, and everything depends on getting it right. To preach about it or to divide with words is easy. But to put it to use, and into practice, is a high art, and hard to achieve. The papists and "enthusiasts" know nothing about it. I see in myself and others, who know perfectly how to talk about it, how hard this distinction is. It is a common art. Very quickly one learns to say that the Law is a different word and doctrine than the Gospel. But to distinguish in practice, to transpose the art into work, is toil and pain. St. Jerome wrote a great deal about it, but like a blind man writing about color. They define Law as having to be circumcised, to offer sacrifices, not to eat this and that, etc. From there they go on to make a new law out of the Gospel, which purportedly teaches how a person should pray and fast, how you should become a monk or a nun, go to church, etc. They call that distinguishing. Yes; but more accurately call it throwing things together into the tub; they do not know themselves what they are washing. So listen to St. Paul, who teaches you that you have to come up higher than the question of being circumcised or not, etc. (which is all a part of being guarded and locked up under the Law). You must come to faith in Christ, through whom we become children of God and are saved forever. Otherwise stay in prison, under the wrath of God.

18. True it is that the Law or the Ten Commandments have not been annulled so that we are exempt from them and not allowed to have them. For Christ set us free from the curse, not from the obedience of the Law. No, that is not what God wants. He wants us to keep the Commandments with total commitment and diligence; but not to put our trust in it when we have done so; or despair if we have not. See to it, then, that you distinguish the two words rightly, not giving more to the Law than its due, otherwise you lose the Gospel. Likewise, you should not look at the Gospel or build thoughts upon it as though the Law had collapsed. Rather, let each of them remain in its own circle and sphere. Just as one must not preach that either the civil government or the pulpit should be abolished; but instead distinguish both kinds of persons and offices, and let each stick to its role and attend to it—the civil authority in accord with its territorial rights, as far as they extend; the preacher in accordance with his teaching office. I do not push myself into the mayor's office, but I keep away from it, as summer from winter. For my office is to preach, baptize, lead souls to heaven, give comfort to poor, afflicted hearts, etc. It belongs to the civil authority, on the other hand, to keep the peace, so that our young

people are brought up in the fear and discipline of God. On the other hand, neither the prince nor the mayor can expect to attend to the preaching, study theology, or comfort the people with God's Word.

19. So what is important is correct distinction. Not like the pope does, who is neither house dog nor hound, neither prince or bishop, yet wants to be both, and covers up his shame with both monks' and politicians' headgear. His bishops do the same thing, though they too are neither bishops nor princes. But this is what you should do: When you find yourself under attack, with the Law threatening to damn you, know that God has not given only the Law, but also a far higher Word, the blessed Gospel of Christ. If the two of them, the Law and the Gospel, now come into confrontation, and the Law finds me, a sinner, and accuses and condemns me, while the Gospel says (Matt. 9:2), "Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven; you shall be saved": which one should I follow? Both are God's Word. St. Paul teaches you the answer: "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian." So this is where the Law stops. For it shall and must be that the lesser word yields and gives way to the Gospel. Both are the Word of God: the Law and the Gospel. But they are not both alike. One is lower, the other higher. One is weaker, the other stronger. One is less, the other greater. If they now wrestle with one another, I follow the Gospel and say goodbye to the Law. It is better not to know the Law, than to lose the Gospel.

20. It is like what you have to do under the Law when God commands (Ex. 20:7), "You shalt not misuse my name," etc., but your prince or your parents command you to disavow God or His Gospel. God says, "Honor my name," and the Law says, "You shall love God more than your neighbor." Here I should let the lesser command (obedience to men) go by the board and keep the higher command of the First Table (which ought to be the master of all the others), and obey it alone. Far more, then, must I hold to the same principle when the Law tries to press me to desert Christ and His gift and His Gospel. In that situation I let the Law go, and I say: Dear Law, if I have failed to do your works, you do them. I am not going to allow myself to be tortured to death on your account and be taken captive and held under you, and thereby forget the Gospel. Whether I have sinned, done wrong, or not done wrong, I leave that for you, Law, to worry about. Be gone with you and leave my heart in peace; in this matter I do not know you. If you want to demand and have it that I live a godly life here on earth, I will gladly do so. But if you want to climb up and break in on me so that I lose what has been given me, then I would much rather not know you at all than lose the gift.

21. Paul is teaching us this distinction when he states that the Law performed the service of keeping us under restraint, etc. It is needed, too, to restrain and to coerce children and rude people. They need its words: You shall honor your father and your mother; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal or kill, etc. For the Old Adam has to be bound and held captive under the Law, which restrains us, drives us, and makes demands on us in order to keep us from a self-willed, wanton life. But that kind of compulsion and restraint should last only until the Gospel has appeared and it is made known that we are to believe in Christ. At that point I say: On your way, Law; I am no longer willing to be held captive by you in my heart, so that I place my trust in having done this or that, or despair through not having done it. Faith is here giving me a sermon from heaven, the Gospel: that the Law no longer can or ought to torment contrite and broken hearts; it has tortured and locked up enough of them already. Therefore make room now for the Gospel, which offers and gives us God's grace and mercy.

22. That now is the picture that St. Paul sees in Christendom, and it accords well with the two words and their nature that we distinguish them and that we also soon distinguish their fruits (i.e., what each of them produces or accomplishes). Their fruits are of two kinds: taking and giving, terrifying and giving joy. The Law makes demands of us and terrifies us. The Gospel gives to us, and consoles. But then to go on from there and make use of this distinction, to put it to work when the two words, Law and Gospel, are battling head to head in your conscience; that you are then and there able to separate them rightly and to say: I am going to have these two words unmingled, with each one shown to its own place, with its own strengths: the Law for the Old Adam, the Gospel for my timid and terrified conscience—for I do not need anyone to drive me to do good works; much less can I bear the Law's accusations, being already not only harshly accused but convicted by my own conscience; rather I need comfort and help from the Gospel of Jesus Christ—to do this now is very hard, especially with the Law wanting to get my conscience into its shackles. See to it, then, that you take hold of the Promise, and do not let the Law get the upper hand or rule in your conscience and so bring you into judgment, for that would be a denial of the Gospel. Instead, you must swing yourself right around and take hold of the grace word, the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins: that God has also commanded the Gospel to be preached to the poor, in which His will is not to play a game with you on the grounds of justice, but to deal with you by His grace as a kindly father does toward his children when they are in need: that He wills to forgive you by grace for

everything that you have failed to do, and to give you as a gift what you are unable to do.

23. Thus the Law should apply its strength toward external discipline alone, and leave undisturbed the little room where the Gospel wills to dwell, as St. Paul says, "Before faith came, we were confined under the Law." Therefore another word must come, in addition to the Law and over it, namely, the Gospel, which sets us into a godliness not our own, one that is outside of us, in Christ alone. For it is impossible for us to become righteous through the Law, because even in the past the Law attempted far more than it accomplished. Hence it is also undeniable that no human being can become godly and righteous through the work of the Law. For if that were possible, it would long since have happened. Therefore another, higher Word belongs here, which is the Gospel and faith in Christ, as is heard. God give us grace and strengthen our faith. Amen!



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