

The Preaching of the Law Sunday After Sunday

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Introduction

Shortly before our gracious Lord Jesus Christ ascended to His heavenly home, He gave His believers of all ages this blessed commission: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). With these words the Savior plainly states what the mission of His followers here on earth is to be. They are to lead others into a living relationship with Him. Thus these lost souls will be rescued from eternal death and given the sure hope of life with God forever.

The tool which Christ’s children are to use to accomplish this noble work is none other than the gospel, the good news about the Savior. Again Jesus Himself has shown us this. In the Gospel of Mark He says, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mk 16:15). Figuratively speaking, the gospel is the power by which a dead rock becomes a living stone in the magnificent temple of the Holy Christian Church. Hence the proclamation of the gospel is to be the chief task of every Christian. It is to be *the* work of the church. Thus Dr. Walther aptly writes in his work *Law and Gospel*, “Behold here the Alpha and Omega of the apostolic office, or the ministry of the church: it is preaching and teaching.”¹

As pastors of Christ’s church, then, you and I have been entrusted with a wonderful calling, haven’t we? We have the great privilege of bringing dark hearts unending light. We have the great privilege of bringing sin-trapped souls total freedom. We have the great privilege of bringing a spiritually dead world a life-giving message.

But if we are going to be successful in our important work of making others growing disciples of Jesus through the power of the gospel, we dare not neglect also to preach the law. For as we know and shall see again, it is only through the preaching of the law that God the Holy Ghost prepares an individual’s heart for the gospel and gives him direction in his Christian life. In this paper we are going to consider this preaching of the law from the pulpits of our churches Sunday after Sunday. We shall do this by contemplating the following four points:

- I. What is the law?
- II. What is the purpose of the law?
- III. Why do we need to preach the law?
- IV. How are we to preach the law?

As we now begin our study, we do so with the humble prayer that God would use what is written here to remind us of the important place of His law in our preaching and refresh us as to the effective proclamation of it.

I. What is the Law?

The Hebrew word for law in the Old Testament is *torah*. “The original meaning of *torah* is instruction, and it conveys the idea of divine teaching or revelation.”² Taken in its broad sense, then, *torah* includes everything which God has made known about Himself in the Scriptures. In its narrow sense *torah* simply refers to the commands which God has given to us. Obviously, in this paper we are speaking of the law in its narrow sense. It is interesting to note here that for the Hebrews law was something of divine origin.

This was not the case with the Greeks. The Greek word for law, *nomos*, signifies “a custom” or “anything received by usage.”³ Thus originally *nomos* contained no reference to a

legislative authority or lawgiver. However, when the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek around the second century B.C., the word *nomos* was used to translate *torah*. By this usage *nomos* also soon acquired the emphasis of law which was of divine origin. Thus as Luther says, “By the term ‘Law,’ nothing else is to be understood than a word of God that is a command, that enjoins upon us what we are to do and what we are to shun, that requires from us some work of obedience.”⁴

The law of God, which is actually a concrete expression of His will for the lives of all mankind, is written in the hearts of all people. St. Paul bears witness to this fact when in his letter to the Christians at Rome he writes, “When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them” (Rm 2:14-15).

However, this natural knowledge of God’s law, which is found in people’s hearts today, is far from perfect. It has been affected by the great fall of mankind into sin. Sin has impaired it. That is why God also wrote His law down for individuals upon two tablets of stone which He gave to Moses who later recorded it in the second book of the Pentateuch. We read of the Lord’s invitation to Moses to receive the law from Him in the 24th chapter of the book of Exodus where it says, “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and commands I have written for their (the Israelites’) instruction’” (Ex 24:12).

The law which God wrote upon people’s hearts and gave to Moses on tables of stone we call the moral law. The moral law is the ten commandments. It is God’s holy immutable will for all people of all ages. God also gave Moses many other laws to give direction to the Israelites’ worship and political life. These ceremonial and civil laws, as they are known, were recorded by Israel’s first leader in his books. However, they are not binding upon individuals today. Thus when we speak of the law in this paper we are referring to God’s everlasting moral law.

As we examine the law of God, we see that it makes tremendous promises to people. It promises them nothing less than life with God and eternal salvation. But these wonderful promises are conditional promises; they are based upon the condition that people fulfill the law perfectly. As the Lord says through Moses, “Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord” (Lv 18:5).⁵

On the other side of the coin, we observe that the law of God also makes frightening threats. Upon those who dare to disobey it, it pronounces a horrible curse of spiritual death, physical death, and eternal death. In the book of Deuteronomy we hear of God’s judgment upon those who break His law in anyway when He sternly says, “Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out” (Dt 27:26). The Prophet Ezekiel spells out most clearly exactly what this curse is in these inspired words: “The soul who sins is the one who will die” (Ez 18:4).⁶

II. What is the Purpose of the Law?

This absolute law of God has been given to mankind by a wise Creator for a very important purpose. Actually the function which the law is to serve is threefold. We find a beautiful summary of these three uses of the law in the sixth article of the Epitome of the *Formula of Concord* which in part reads, “The Law was given to men for three reasons: first, that thereby outward discipline might be maintained against wild, disobedient men;...secondly, that men

thereby may be led to the knowledge of their sins; thirdly, that after they are regenerate and...the flesh notwithstanding cleaves to them, they might on this account have a fixed rule according to which they are to regulate and direct their whole life.”⁷ The Lutheran Church has summarized these three functions of the law by speaking of them as a curb, mirror, and guide respectively. Let us look briefly at each one of these uses of the law.

The first purpose for which God gave people His law is that of a curb. It is to restrain, to check, to hold back coarse outbursts of sin by people through its threats just as a curbing inhibits cars from driving on the sidewalk. The fear of punishment which the law possesses is to motivate people to at least outwardly do what the law says (civic righteousness). Thus a certain degree of order is maintained in society. By this use of the law, then, God actually preserves the wonderful world which He has created.

The law serves as a curb in both the life of the unbeliever and believer. For the former is totally unregenerate and the latter still has the old man living within him. Thus the curb of the law is needed by both so that sinful actions may be restrained. The Apostle Paul speaks of this use of the law when in his first letter to Timothy he writes, “We also know that law is made not for good men but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me” (1 Tm, 1:9-10). We have a fair example of the law fulfilling its purpose as a curb in the legal system of our country which to a large extent was originally founded upon God’s law.

The second purpose which God’s law is to serve for mankind is that of a mirror. It is to show all people what they really are like even as a mirror gives an individual a true picture of his outward appearance. When a person comes face to face with the law of God, it shows him just how terribly short he has fallen of God’s demands for his life. It plainly un.masks him for the sinner he really is. It firmly convicts him of personal guilt. It utterly terrifies him with the sure threat of divine punishment. It continually fills him with unending despair over the divine irrevocable verdict of death. As Paul says, “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Rm 3:19-20). Bullinger catches well the flavor of what the apostle is saying here when in commenting on the second use of God’s law he writes, “The Law is a certain looking-glass, wherein we behold our own corruption, frailness, imbecility, imperfection, and our judgment, that is, our just and deserved damnation. ...For none of us doth look into his own bosom, nor into the secrets of his own breast, but we do all flatter ourselves, and will not be persuaded that our thoughts and deeds are so corrupt as they be in very deed; and therefore doth the law creep in, and lay open the secrets of our hearts, and bringeth to light our sin and corruption.”⁸

Once a man has been brought to this kind of a personal knowledge of his sins, he is ready to hear the comfort-bringing message of the gospel. For he has learned to see his total sinfulness and been led to despair of his own righteousness. Now by God’s grace the message of the Savior can bear fruit in his heart. Thus as a mirror the law of God ultimately directs unbeliever and believer alike to Jesus, the Redeemer of the world. Paul again puts it best: “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith” (Ga 3:24). In view of this, little wonder that Koehler writes, “The chief purpose of the law, therefore, is to work knowledge of,

and sorrow over, sin.”⁹ Luther also emphasizes the same point when he says, “The Law, too, with its office fittingly . . . serves in the attainment of justification. To be sure, it does not justify; but it does drive a man to the promise of grace and makes it sweet and desirable. Therefore we do not abolish the Law but indicate its true office and use by saying that it is a very useful servant, driving a man to Christ.”¹⁰ When the adulterous and murderous King David was finally crushed by God through the Prophet Nathan, the law was fulfilling its function as a mirror.

The third purpose which the law of God is to perform for individuals is that of a guide. The law shows Christians what is truly pleasing to God even as a guide in a jungle shows those in his party the safe way to their desired destination. The law serves this final function only for those who are true followers of the Savior. After people’s hearts have been broken by the law and reborn by the gospel, they desire to serve the Lord who has shown them such boundless grace. For they realize that had it not been for God’s love to them, they would have been lost forever. Thus they wish to thank the Lord for all that He has done for them by doing what pleases Him. The law shows Christians what God-fearing living actually is all about. By meditating upon the law, they learn of ways in which they can praise the Lord for His great mercy to them. This third use of the law is spoken of by the author of Psalm 119 when he writes, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Ps 119:105). In the actions of the faith-filled Jewish tax collector, Zacchaeus, we see the law serving as a guide. For after his conversion, in keeping with the law he returned whatever goods he had wrongly taken from others.

III. Why Do We Need to Preach the Law?

If the law of God is going to fulfill these purposes for which the Lord has given it to us, we must boldly proclaim it to ourselves and to the members of our congregations. We need to hear the law so that it can perform its work upon our hearts.

As we have briefly mentioned before, although Christians are no less than the very children of God and heirs of eternal glory, they still are sinners. Pastor Silas Krueger wrote a number of years ago in a paper on moralism, “The person who listens as we preach from the pulpit or who seeks counsel in our study has been redeemed and regenerated, but is still rebellious and recalcitrant at the same time.”¹¹ Paul expresses this thought in this way, “In my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members” (Rm 7:22-23). Christians still have the old man living in them. It continually makes war against their new nature. All too often it prevails in the struggle. Left unchecked it would eventually destroy the Christian’s saving trust in Jesus and completely take control of his life. But in the law we have an effective tool for curbing the advances of the old man, smashing through his front lines, and sending him into a headlong retreat. For the law reminds Christians of what they really are like by nature and works true repentance in their souls by the power of the Spirit. Thus to a certain degree the law of God actually assists Christians to remain what they are, namely, the redeemed children of the Highest.

Because a Christian still has the old man living within his soul, he also is in part blind to what God’s will for his life actually is. By nature He does not exactly know what the Lord expects of him as His disciple. The law alone can remedy this. It plainly shows the Christian just what is pleasing to his God. It clearly spells out for him what will make his Lord happy. Paul puts it this way, “You know God’s will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the

law” (Rm 3:18). Thus the law of God helps Christians to live as the people of God which they are by showing them what the Christian life actually involves.

IV. How Are We to Preach the Law?

In view of these truths it is apparent that the law of God certainly needs to be preached by us to the people in our churches. But if the law is going to accomplish the salutary ends which the Lord intends it to, it must be proclaimed according to certain guidelines which the divine Giver of the law Himself has specified either directly or indirectly in His Word. We would now like to look at three such principles which will help us to Preach God’s law both properly and effectively.

A. Use the Law Specifically

The first principle which we need to keep in mind as we preach God’s law to our people is that we are to use the law specifically. We are to apply the law personally to the hearers who are sitting before us.

The Apostle Peter gives us an excellent example of this in his sermon to the crowd in Jerusalem on Pentecost. After explaining to the bewildered people exactly what was taking place that morning, the Spirit-emboldened apostle went on to describe most beautifully the great work of Jesus. Then came the application portion of the address: “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom *you* crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Ac 2:36; emphasis mine). Notice that Peter does not say “whom Caiaphas crucified” or “whom Governor Pilate crucified” or “whom the Roman soldiers” crucified. He says “whom *you* crucified.” He applied the law specifically to each individual in the gathering with amazing results.

It will do little good to launch into an unbridled tirade against the evils of today’s society or the sins of America’s most perverse citizens. The final result of such a preaching of the law will be a congregation of self-righteous individuals who with the Pharisee of old will haughtily look down upon others while gleefully saying, “God, I thank you that I am not like all other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get” (Lk 18:11-12). Speaking of this very point in his article entitled, “Preaching the Law,” Alvin Rogness writes, “From my youth I recall that much preaching was directed against the quintet of evil: dancing, drinking, smoking, card-playing, and movie-going. I lived in a small homogeneous community without a theater and had therefore been quite unexposed to most of these fearful transgressions. Moreover, ninety percent of the congregation could sit through such exhortations and bask in the comfort of conjuring up pictures of the “worldly” people who were not there.”¹²

B. Impart the Law Powerfully

The second guideline which we need to keep in mind for our law preaching is that we are to impart the law powerfully. We are to apply the law to our hearers firmly so that the Holy Ghost can work sincere contrition in their souls. Then they will truly be uplifted and strengthened in their saving faith as we present the comforting assurances of the gospel to them.

Proclaiming the law powerfully involves much more than simply tossing out a few general statements as “we all have done wrong” or “we all have offended our God” and then hurrying on to the beautiful message of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Nor is a brief paragraph in which a few of the more common sins are enumerated really a potent declaration of the law. Such preachments of the law, by in large, leave the person in the pew unscathed. He feels little personal responsibility for

his transgressions against the holy God. He does not fully grasp the horrible predicament which he is in by nature. Thus when the good news is heralded by the pastor he feels that he has heard all of this before and so does not gain much spiritually from the address which is presented. Rogness sums up this thought well when he writes, "To preach the law as if we are but worms squirming about in a bit of mischief, is to miss the immensity of our sin on the one hand and the wonder of our station on the other hand."¹³

If we are going to preach the law with power, we need to bring three truths home to our hearers. First of all we need to solemnly focus our hearers' attention on God's great attributes of holiness and justice. Secondly, we need to describe in detail our natural condition and the abundance of disgusting sin which it produces in our lives. Thirdly, we need to clearly set forth the terrible results of the conflict between our character and God's. At times all this may be accomplished in just a few well-placed sentences. We are reminded here again of Peter's address to the people on Pentecost. With just a few words from Peter God was able to bring the entire weight of the law down upon the apostle's hearers and crush the old man within them. However, at other times a powerful preaching of the law may involve several well-developed paragraphs within our sermon. When the Lord God approached Adam and Eve after their tragic fall into sin, He spent some time unveiling their wicked actions to them.

To present the law to our congregations in this way is by no means an easy task. It requires much prayer, thought, study, and even courage so that we do not shrink back from our task or become repetitious and lifeless."¹⁴ For as Dr. Walther says, "It is...one of the most important requisites of a true evangelical minister that he know how to depict for his hearers the true nature of sin in terms that are as plain and distinct as they are terrible, drastic, and impressive. For without a real knowledge of what an awful thing sin is man cannot understand and accept the Gospel."¹⁵

C. Keep the Law Within its Limits

The third principle which we need to follow if our presentation of the law to our people is going to be pleasing to our Lord is that we are to keep the law within its limits. As we have seen, the law is able to show individuals their sin and need for a Savior. The law is also able to give guidance to the believer in living a life which truly honors his Lord. But the law cannot rightly motivate or empower a person to do the will of God. Only the gospel message is able to accomplish that. We dare never attempt to effect with the law what only the gospel can do. For that would be a fateful broadening of the assigned task which the law is to perform. Thus we constantly need to be on our guard so that in our preaching we keep the law within the limits which God Himself has imposed upon it.

As opposed to the first two guidelines for preaching the law which are connected with both the first and second functions of the law, this principle addresses the third use of the law. In our preaching we are certainly to show our people what true Christian living consists of. Especially in today's materialistic and permissive society it is vital that we clearly define for them what the sanctified life is all about. But we need to be careful lest in our fervor to see our people more and more live the Christian life we unconsciously begin to slip into moralism which has been

* For some fresh ideas in presenting the law and gospel see Pastor Gary Griep's article entitled, "Using Law-Gospel Pairs in Preaching," found in Vol. 79, No. 2, pg. 140f of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*.

defined by Professor Gawrisch* as “the use of the Law with its threats and promises to try to motivate others to live an outwardly upright life.”¹⁶ Such a use of the law always brings tragic results. Either it makes the members of our congregations self-righteous Pharisees who think that God must be very pleased with their apparent goodness or it throws them into total despair of ever standing on the right side of the judgment seat of Christ on the Last Day. Thus a moralistic use of the law turns people away from Jesus, their only Savior and Source of strength for living a truly God-pleasing life. Little wonder that Dr. Walther says, “If you want to revive your...congregations and cause the Spirit of peace, joy, faith, and confidence, the childlike spirit, the Spirit of soul-rest, to take up His abode among the members of your congregation, you must, for God’s sake, not employ the Law to bring that about.”¹⁷

As pastors we need to continually seek God’s wisdom and put forth conscientious effort if we are going to keep the law within its limits in our preaching. For in our souls also dwells the *opinio legis* which all too easily can surface in our ministry to others unless we are on our guard. One good way to avoid moralistic preaching is to make sure that the gospel is always proclaimed before we begin speaking of the sanctified life of the believer even as the Apostle Paul does in his beautiful epistles. This need not be a detailed presentation of the work of Christ on behalf of a sinful world. But the gospel ought to be there in some clear textual form. For the good news of our Savior alone gives people the motivation and power for living the Christian life. The Psalmist says it best when he succinctly writes, “I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free” (Ps 119:32).

As an example of the point which we have been considering, let us take the account of the twelve year old Jesus in the Temple found in Luke 2:41-52. If the sole truth which a pastor draws from this portion of Scripture is that we ought to study the Word of God even as Jesus did for then we shall be blessed by God, he is guilty of not keeping the law within its limits. For he is attempting to use the promises of the law to change his parishioners’ behavior. Some of his people will leave church thinking that God must be fairly happy with them for they read their Bibles twice a week. Other of his people will go home feeling very disturbed for they realize that their love for God’s Word in no way comes close to that of the Savior’s.

The proper approach to this Bible lesson is for a pastor to show the members of his congregation just how often they have let golden opportunities to study God’s Word slip by, point them to their forgiving Savior, and encourage them out of thankful love to emulate the fine example which Jesus gives us in this story. In this way the people of the congregation will truly be built up in their Christian faith and motivated and empowered for Christ-like living. For through it they see their sins and their Savior. Through it their love for their Lord is renewed. Through it they learn how they can thank their Savior for His love for them. Thus they leave the church refreshed and determined to live as God’s people in the coming week.¹⁸

Conclusion

*Professor Gawrisch has written an excellent paper for Sunday School teachers. It is entitled, “Guarding Against Moralizing in Our Sunday School Teaching.” Contact the seminary library if you desire a copy of this paper as it is found in their essay file.

As pastors the Lord has indeed blessed us with a glorious calling, hasn't He? We have the great privilege of leading people to saving faith in Jesus and helping them to grow in it as the Spirit of God works through the Gospel we proclaim. But let us not forget that if we are going to herald the good news of a Savior from sin effectively we also need to preach the law as God intends it to be declared. I pray that the truths presented in this paper, which we now have gone through together, may prove a useful tool for you to evaluate and improve your preaching of the law by. For then this essay will accomplish the purpose for which it was written. May our gracious Lord grant this for the sake of our preaching, for the sake of our hearers, and for the sake of His saving will.

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- ¹ Dr. C. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law And Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), p. 247.
- ² Alec Vidler, *Christ's Strange Work* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1963), p. 153.
- ³ Dr. Joseph Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p. 427.
- ⁴ Walther, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ⁷ *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 805. Translated by F. Bente and W. Dau.
- ⁸ Vidler, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54.
- ⁹ Edward Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), p. 60.
- ¹⁰ Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), vol. II, p. 757.
- ¹¹ Silas Krueger, *Moralizing and the Pastoral Ministry: The Proper Use of Law and Gospel in the Pastoral Ministry* (Arizona-California District Pastoral Conference at Tucson, Arizona, 1978), p. 4.
- ¹² Alvin Rogness, "Preaching the Law" (*Lutheran Quarterly*, 1955), vol. VII, Winter, p. 321.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 322.
- ¹⁴ Walther, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 325.
- ¹⁶ Wilbert Gawrisch, *Guarding Against Moralizing in Our Sunday School Teaching* (Sunday School Conference at Sussex, Wisconsin, 1970), p. 3.
- ¹⁷ Walther, *op. cit.*, pp. 385-386.
- ¹⁸ Gawrisch, *op. cit.*, p. 11.