

Sermon 2009 Pentecost 12
August 23, 2009
Text: Mark 7:1-13
Theme: "What Serves Which?"

Law and Gospel are fundamental to the whole Christian belief system. If one does not understand Law and Gospel, nothing else falls into place quite right.

Law is that which God demands of us, summarized quite nicely in the 10 Commandments, more succinctly in Leviticus 19:2

"Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy," and explained perfectly by Jesus himself in Matthew 22:37-39,

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Gospel is the promise of forgiveness and salvation for us, won for us by Jesus' death on the cross and proven to us by his resurrection from the dead because we were unable to keep the Law.

If you keep Law and Gospel clear and distinct from one another, Christianity is really pretty simple. God has high expectations for us and desires us to strive for those expectations but has already paid the penalty for our failure to meet those expectations. To the extent that we strive for those expectations, we will discover rewards in this life, not supernatural rewards necessarily, but much more likely the natural rewards of living within the context of God's plan. If I love and help my neighbor, I will have less stress and better relationships with my neighbor. To the extent that we ignore God's expectations, there will be consequences, not supernatural consequences because Jesus has already been damned for us and that debt is paid, but natural consequences. If I dishonor those in authority, I cut off the very system that God has put in place to safeguard me and help me to live a peaceful, joyful life.

The problem comes when we forget that we are all in need of the Gospel and begin using the Law to our own advantage. Then God's Word becomes like a sealed up book or written pages for an illiterate person. We see this exemplified in Paul's letter to

the Ephesians. Wives submit to your husbands. Husbands love your wives. If Law and Gospel are kept straight we know that love and submission are the greatest gifts we can give to one another for they are the very gifts Christ gave to all of us. He loved us without question and submitted himself to death for us, even death on a cross. But if we try to start treating gifts like laws, everything falls apart. Well I will submit to you when you love me enough. You have to submit to me because God says so. See how we take beautiful gifts and turn them into Law? We start putting qualifiers on the gifts and adding words like should and ought. As soon as we "Law up" the gifts, we no longer have gifts – just Law.

The Pharisees loved the Law and used the Law to make themselves feel better. Maybe I'm a mean, hateful person who never has a good word to say to anybody and all I can do is criticize people and complain about everything they do but AT LEAST I DON'T EAT WITH DEFILED HANDS!!!!

Oh come on. The point of ceremonial washing was to give people a rite with which to show thanks to God for providing food

much like our ritual of meal time prayers. If you want to pray before you eat, that's great. But if you don't THAT IS YOUR BUSINESS and I have no business criticizing you for not finding meaning or import in MY PRACTICE. Saying "Come Lord Jesus" is not a Law. It is just our privilege to speak to God in ways we find meaningful and many of us use memorized mealtime prayers because it's convenient.

What about in restaurants? I personally don't have a need to conduct my religious rites in a public dining establishment, but if you want to quietly say a prayer before eating, that's fine – but please don't be an annoying, embarrassing Christian who insists that everyone at the table must pray together with you, or one who shouts your prayer for all the restaurant to hear, or demand prayer requests from your waitress who is now feeling horribly uncomfortable but has to play along for a tip. People who do this with prayer are not treating it as the privilege they have to speak with God but as a required action for one to be a good Christian. They have taken Gospel and turned it into Law.

Jesus comes to us with open arms and wonderful gifts of love and grace and forgiveness. False teachers try to tell us that we must do something to receive his gifts. We must live a certain way, make the right choices and NEVER DOUBT HIM. Oh please. Every one of us doubts him. How can any sane person live in this world where perfectly nice people get hurt for no reason, where little children get beaten and abandoned, where people blow up other people over ideologies...how can any sane person not doubt him? And that is where the Gospel comes in.

Just when my faith is weakest, my Baptismal waters refresh my soul. His healing Word strikes the very cord in my heart that was hurting and I am nourished with His body and blood that suffered everything that I would ever suffer and far, far more. That's when the Gospel comes into my life and calms my fears and gives me hope that I will get through today and might even end up liking it and that the day will come for me and all my brothers and sisters on this earth when all the evil will be reversed and we will have the world that our loving Lord intended for us to have in the first place. If you want to live under the

Law, you just go right ahead. I don't have such confidence in myself or in this world that we will ever be able to fulfill God's holy Law. I prefer the grace and forgiveness of the Gospel. It was purchased for me and for you with the very life and soul of Jesus Christ. It seems a shame to box it up like good china that never gets used, especially since, unlike the good china, the Gospel can never be broken. AMEN.