Law and Gospel

          There are ultimately two main teachings of the Bible: Law and Gospel. The Law shows us our sin. The Gospel shows us our Savior. It’s really that simple.  Understanding the proper distinction between these two teachings is the key to understanding the Bible.

          The law’s primary purpose is to expose our sin to us.  “Through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3:20). Unless we have our sin exposed to us, we will never see the need for dealing with it.

          Think of it this way: if you have dirt all over your face but don’t know it, you can walk around all day thinking nothing is wrong – until you look in a mirror. Then the mirror exposes the dirt (that was always there) so you can wash your face and be clean.

          The law is a lot like that mirror. It exposes the sin that is lurking inside all of us. And once we recognize we are sinners, the law then hits us even harder: “the one who sins is the one who will die” (Ezekiel 18:20). The law is also like a bright and awful light that exposes all of the dark parts of our lives, the hidden vengeful thoughts, the words spoken behind someone’s back, the greed and lust that motivate so many of our actions.

          One reason God tells us how we are supposed to live (gives us laws to follow) is so that we will fully understand how far we fall short of what He righteously commands of us,  that he is right and just to condemn us, and that we have a problem so big that there is no possible solution within ourselves to solve it.

          None of that is good news. But it is a necessary preparation to receive the real Good News (that is what the word “Gospel” means!).

          The good news is that God so loved you so much that he sent his Son to die for your sins so that you could believe in him and have eternal life. The Gospel shows us our Savior, Jesus.

          When we apply Law and Gospel to some difficult Bible passages, they quickly become understandable. Take the account of the rich young man who approached Jesus. He asked Jesus, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” We might think that Jesus should just say “Believe in me and you will get eternal life.”

Instead here was Jesus’ reply:  “if you want to enter life, obey the commandments.” Jesus was holding up the mirror of the Law for the man. The young man didn’t get it. He thought he had done everything the law commanded. So Jesus turned on the spotlight to make sure he could see himself clearly in the mirror: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

          Now the mirror worked. We are told the man “went away sad, because he had great wealth.”

          Jesus used the law to expose the sin in this man’s heart. This rich young man had broken the first commandment (have no other gods) because he had made his earthly possessions his God. Until he recognized and repented of that sin, any talk of grace (God’s love) would fall on deaf ears.

          Law and Gospel. Sin and Grace. These are the keys to understanding the Bible.