

LAW & GOSPEL DIAGNOSTIC CHART

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COUNSELING DECISION TREE

Reference Sheet for Confessional Lutheran Ministry



COUNSELING DECISION TREE

A workflow for pastoral conversations.

STEP 1 — Diagnose (See “Explanation of Diagnostic Questions”)

Ask:

- “How do you see your situation before God”
- “What troubles you most”
- “Do you believe this is sin”
- “What do you think God thinks of you right now”

Classify the person using the “Law & Gospel Diagnostic Chart” on next page

STEP 2 — Apply the Correct Word, based on the “Law & Gospel Diagnostic Chart”

- If SECURE → Apply LAW
Name the sin; show consequences; withhold Gospel until repentance. Goal: Contrition.
- If TERRIFIED → Apply GOSPEL
Announce forgiveness; use Baptismal identity; absolve. Goal: Comfort and faith.
- If CONFUSED → Clarify BOTH
Separate demands (Law) from gifts (Gospel). Goal: Restore assurance.
- If SUFFERING → Apply GOSPEL COMFORT
Emphasize Christ’s presence; use Psalms; resurrection promises. Goal: Strengthen endurance.
- If HABITUAL SINNER → Apply SHARP LAW
Name sin; warn of danger; call to repentance. Goal: Break the cycle.

STEP 3 — Look for Repentance or Resistance

- Repentance: Admits sin; stops excuses; desires forgiveness; sorrow → Move immediately to Gospel
- Resistance: Excuses; blame-shifting; minimizing; anger → Continue with Law

STEP 4 — Deliver the Word Properly

- LAW: Specific • Personal • Scriptural • Unsoftened
- GOSPEL: Unconditional • Personal (“for you”) • Complete • Without demands

STEP 5 — Direct person to the Means of Grace

Absolution • Holy Communion • Baptismal identity • Scripture • Discipline (if needed)

STEP 6 — Follow Up

Check in • Encourage worship • Provide Scripture • Offer absolution • Support accountability.

LAW & GOSPEL DIAGNOSTIC CHART

Identify the spiritual condition before applying Law or Gospel.

1. The Secure (Impenitent / Self-Righteous / Indifferent)

Signs: Excuses sin; minimizes God's commands; blames others; no fear of God; trusts in morality or feelings.

Correct Word: Law in full sternness

Key Verses:

- Romans 3:20 — "Through the Law comes knowledge of sin."
- Galatians 3:10 — "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things..."
- Matthew 23 — Jesus' woes to the Pharisees.

Goal: Break pride; expose sin; destroy false security.

Do NOT: Offer Gospel comfort; soften the Law; normalize sin.

2. The Terrified (Penitent / Broken / Doubting)

Signs: Burdened by guilt; afraid of wrath; despairing; ashamed; unsure of forgiveness.

Correct Word: Gospel in full sweetness

Key Verses:

- Psalm 34:18 — "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted."
- Matthew 11:28 — "Come to Me, all who labor..."
- Romans 8:1 — "There is now no condemnation..."
- John 20:23 — Absolution.

Goal: Comfort; absolve; restore.

Do NOT: Add demands; re-preach Law; question sincerity.

3. The Confused (Mixing Law and Gospel)

Signs: "I know I'm forgiven, but I still feel condemned"; "I'll try harder so God accepts me."

Correct Word: Clarify Law vs. Gospel.

Key Verses:

- Romans 10:4 — "Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness."
- Galatians 2:16 — "A person is not justified by works of the Law..."
- Ephesians 2:8-9 — Salvation is gift, not works.

Goal: Untangle the conscience.

Do NOT: Add more Law or give vague comfort.

4. The Suffering (Afflicted by Trials, Not Sin)

Signs: Illness, grief, fear, loss; not caused by personal sin; "Why is God doing this?"

Correct Word: Gospel comfort; promises; presence.

Key Verses:

- Psalm 23 — "The Lord is my Shepherd..."
- Romans 8:18 — Present sufferings vs. future glory.
- 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 — God comforts the afflicted.
- Isaiah 43:2 — "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." **Goal:** Strengthen faith and hope.

Goal: Strengthen faith and hope.

Do NOT: Imply punishment; moralize suffering.

5. The Habitual Sinner (Repeated Sin / Dull Conscience)

Signs: Repeated patterns; minimizes seriousness; wants comfort without repentance.

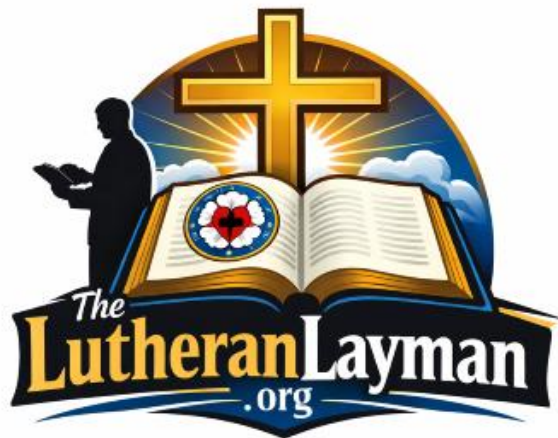
Correct Word: Sharp Law; call to repentance.

Key Verses:

- Proverbs 28:13 — “Whoever conceals his sins does not prosper...”
- Hebrews 10:26–27 — Warning against deliberate sin.
- Acts 2:37–38 — “Repent and be baptized...”

Goal: Break hardness of heart.

Do NOT: Offer Gospel prematurely; excuse sin.



EXPLANATION OF DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS FOR PASTORAL CARE

These questions are not casual—they are **spiritual instruments** designed to reveal the heart, expose the conscience, and guide the pastor toward the correct application of **Law** or **Gospel**.

Each question includes:

- **Purpose** (what the pastor is trying to discern)
 - **What answers reveal** (secure, terrified, confused, suffering, habitual)
 - **Pastoral implications** (Law or Gospel)
 - **Bible verses** that anchor the diagnostic
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EXPANDED DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS FOR PASTORAL CARE

1. “How do you see your situation before God?”

(The foundational diagnostic question)

Purpose

To reveal the person’s **self-understanding before God**—their spiritual posture.

What answers reveal

- **Secure:** “I’m fine... I’m doing my best... I don’t think God is upset.”
→ Apply **Law** (Rom 3:20; Gal 3:10)
- **Terrified:** “I feel condemned... I don’t think God can forgive me.”
→ Apply **Gospel** (Rom 8:1; Ps 34:18)
- **Confused:** “I know God forgives me, but I still think I need to earn it.”
→ Clarify **Law/Gospel** (Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8–9)
- **Suffering:** “I don’t think this is about sin—I’m just hurting.”
→ Apply **Gospel comfort** (Ps 23; 2 Cor 1:3–4)
- **Habitual:** “I know it’s wrong, but it’s not that big of a deal.”
→ Apply **sharp Law** (Heb 10:26–27)

Pastoral implication

This question is the **spiritual X-ray**. It reveals whether the conscience is **hard, wounded, or confused**.

2. “What troubles you most about this situation?”

(Reveals the true burden of the heart)

Purpose

To uncover whether the person is troubled by:

- **Sin**
- **Consequences**
- **Shame**
- **Suffering**
- **Fear of God**
- **Fear of others**

What answers reveal

- **Secure:** Troubled by consequences, not sin (“I just don’t want to get caught”).
→ **Law** (Prov 28:13)
- **Terrified:** Troubled by guilt (“I’ve sinned against God”). → **Gospel** (1 John 1:9)
- **Confused:** Troubled by mixed categories (“I sinned, so God is punishing me with illness”).
→ Clarify **Law/Gospel** (John 9:3)
- **Suffering:** Troubled by pain, loss, fear—not sin. **Comfort** (Rom 8:18)
- **Habitual:** Troubled by inconvenience, not repentance. → **Sharp Law** (Luke 13:3)

Pastoral implication

This question reveals **what the conscience is actually feeling**, not what the person thinks they should say.

3. “Do you believe this is sin?”

(Separates moral failure from misfortune)

Purpose

To determine whether the person acknowledges sin **as sin**.

What answers reveal

- **Secure:** “No, I don’t think it’s sin.” → **Law** (1 John 1:8)
- **Terrified:** “Yes, and I’m crushed by it.” → **Gospel** (Ps 51:17)
- **Confused:** “Maybe? I don’t know... I feel guilty but I’m not sure why.” → Clarify **Law/Gospel** (Rom 7:7)
- **Suffering:** “No, this is just suffering.” → **Comfort** (Isa 43:2)
- **Habitual:** “Yes, but it’s not a big deal.” → **Sharp Law** (Heb 3:13)

Pastoral implication

This question reveals whether the person needs **conviction** or **absolution**.

4. “What do you think God thinks of you right now?”

(Reveals the person’s functional theology)

Purpose

To expose the person’s **actual belief** about God’s disposition toward them.

What answers reveal

- **Secure:** “God understands... He’s not upset.” → **Law** (Rom 2:5)
- **Terrified:** “He must hate me... I’m unforgivable.” → **Gospel** (Rom 5:8)
- **Confused:** “I think He forgives me, but I still feel condemned.” → Clarify **Law/Gospel** (Rom 8:31–39)
- **Suffering:** “I don’t think He’s angry—I’m just hurting.” → **Comfort** (Ps 46:1)
- **Habitual:** “God will forgive me later.” → **Sharp Law** (Gal 6:7)

Pastoral implication

This question reveals whether the person’s **image of God** is distorted by:

- Pride, Despair. Confusion. Suffering, or Presumption

5. “What do you want God to do for you right now?”

(Reveals the heart’s deepest desire)

Purpose

To identify whether the person seeks:

- Forgiveness
- Escape from consequences
- Comfort
- Vindication
- Strength
- Permission

What answers reveal

- **Secure:** Wants relief from consequences, not repentance. → **Law** (Rom 6:23)
- **Terrified:** Wants forgiveness and peace. → **Gospel** (Isa 1:18)
- **Confused:** Wants both forgiveness and self-justification. → Clarify **Law/Gospel** (Gal 5:1)
- **Suffering:** Wants comfort, presence, hope. → **Comfort** (2 Cor 1:3–4)
- **Habitual:** Wants God to “make it easier” without repentance. → **Sharp Law** (James 1:15)

Pastoral implication

This question reveals whether the person is seeking **Christ** or merely **relief**.

6. “What do you believe God has already done for you in Christ?”

(Reveals whether the Gospel is known, trusted, or forgotten)

Purpose

To determine whether the person’s faith is anchored in:

- Christ’s finished work
- Their own works
- Their feelings
- Their circumstances

What answers reveal

- **Secure:** “I don’t need forgiveness—I’m fine.” → **Law** (Rom 3:23)
- **Terrified:** “I know Christ died for me, but I still feel condemned.” → **Gospel** (Rom 8:1)
- **Confused:** “Christ forgives me, but I still need to prove myself.” → Clarify **Law/Gospel** (Eph 2:8–9)
- **Suffering:** “Christ is with me in this.” → **Comfort** (Heb 13:5)
- **Habitual:** “Christ forgives me, so it doesn’t matter.” → **Sharp Law** (Rom 6:1–2)

Pastoral implication

This question reveals whether the Gospel is **believed**, **misunderstood**, or **abused**.

7. “What do you think repentance looks like for you right now?”

(Reveals whether the person understands repentance)

Purpose

To discern whether repentance is:

- genuine
- superficial
- misunderstood
- absent

What answers reveal

- **Secure:** “I don’t need to repent.” → **Law** (Luke 13:3)
- **Terrified:** “I want to turn from this—I hate my sin.” → **Gospel** (Ps 51:10–12)
- **Confused:** “I’ll try harder to be better.” → Clarify **Law/Gospel** (Rom 7:18)
- **Suffering:** “I’m not repenting—I’m just hurting.” → **Comfort** (Ps 34:18)
- **Habitual:** “I’ll repent later.” → **Sharp Law** (Heb 3:13)

Pastoral implication

This question reveals whether repentance is **present, misunderstood, or avoided**.

LAW & GOSPEL DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION FLOWCHART

A pastoral decision-making map for spiritual triage

START → Ask the First Question

Q1 — “How do you see your situation before God?”

If the person says:

- “I’m fine... I don’t think God is upset.”
→ **Classify: Secure** → Go to **LAW PATH**
- “I feel condemned... I’m afraid of God.”
→ **Classify: Terrified** → Go to **GOSPEL PATH**
- “I know God forgives me, but I still feel condemned.”
→ **Classify: Confused** → Go to **CLARIFICATION PATH**
- “I’m not sinning—I’m just hurting.”
→ **Classify: Suffering** → Go to **COMFORT PATH**
- “Yeah it’s sin, but it’s not a big deal.”
→ **Classify: Habitual** → Go to **SHARP LAW PATH**

LAW PATH (SECURE)

Apply: Law in full sternness Verses: Rom 3:20; Gal 3:10; Matt 23

Next Question: Q2 — “Do you believe this is sin?”

If “No” → Continue Law

If “Maybe” → Clarify Law

If “Yes” → Go to Gospel Path

GOSPEL PATH (TERRIFIED)

Apply: Gospel in full sweetness Verses: Rom 8:1; Ps 34:18; Matt 11:28

Next Question: Q3 — “What do you believe God thinks of you right now?”

If “He hates me” → Strengthen Gospel

If “He forgives me” → Give Absolution

If “I don’t know” → Clarify Gospel

CLARIFICATION PATH (CONFUSED)

Apply: Distinguish Law vs. Gospel Verses: Gal 2:16; Rom 10:4; Eph 2:8–9

Next Question: Q4 — “What do you believe God has already done for you in Christ?”

If “He forgives me, but I must earn it” → Clarify Gospel

If “He forgives me fully” → Move to Comfort

If “I don’t know” → Teach Justification

COMFORT PATH (SUFFERING)

Apply: Gospel comfort, promises, presence **Verses:** Ps 23; Isa 43:2; Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 1:3–4

Next Question: Q5 — “What troubles you most about this situation?”

If “Pain, fear, loss” → Continue Comfort

If “I think God is punishing me” → Clarify Law/Gospel

If “I sinned” → Move to Law → Gospel

SHARP LAW PATH (HABITUAL)

Apply: Sharp Law, call to repentance **Verses:** Heb 10:26–27; Prov 28:13; Luke 13:3

Next Question: Q6 — “What do you think repentance looks like for you right now?”

If “I don’t need to repent” → Continue Law

If “I’ll repent later” → Warn with Law

If “I want to turn from this” → Move to Gospel

FINAL STEP — DISCERN REPENTANCE OR RESISTANCE

Repentance:

Admits sin • Stops excuses • Desires forgiveness • Shows sorrow → **Apply Gospel immediately** (Ps 51; Luke 18:13)

Resistance:

Excuses • Minimizing • Blame-shifting • Anger → **Continue Law** (Acts 7:51; Prov 29:1)

PASTORAL SCRIPT FOR USING DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

A word-for-word pastoral dialogue model

OPENING

“Tell me what brings you here today. I’m here to listen, and I want to understand how you’re experiencing this before God.”

Q1 — “How do you see your situation before God?”

- **If Secure:** “Let’s look at what God says about this in His Word. He speaks clearly so that we may see our need for His mercy.”
- **If Terrified:** “God does not despise a broken and contrite heart. Let’s hear what Christ has done for you.”
- **If Confused:** “Let’s separate what God commands from what He promises.”
- **If Suffering:** “This is not God punishing you. Let’s hear His comfort.”
- **If Habitual:** “God calls you to repentance because He desires your life, not your destruction.”

Q2 — “What troubles you most about this situation?”

- **If troubled by consequences:** “Let’s talk about the deeper issue—what God says about this sin.”
- **If troubled by guilt:** “Christ came for sinners. Hear His promise.”
- **If troubled by confusion:** “Let’s untangle Law and Gospel.”
- **If troubled by suffering:** “God is near to the brokenhearted.”

Q3 — “Do you believe this is sin?”

- **If No:** “Let’s look at God’s Word together. He speaks truth for our good.”
- **If Yes and terrified:** “Then hear this: Christ died for this sin. It is forgiven.”
- **If Yes but minimizing:** “God warns us because He loves us. This is serious.”

Q4 — “What do you think God thinks of you right now?”

- **If Secure:** “God calls all people to repentance so they may live.”
- **If Terrified:** “In Christ, God is for you, not against you.”
- **If Confused:** “Let’s distinguish what God demands from what Christ gives.”
- **If Suffering:** “He is with you in this.”

Q5 — “What do you want God to do for you right now?”

- **If forgiveness:** “Then hear His absolution.”
- **If escape from consequences:** “Let’s talk about repentance and faith.”
- **If comfort:** “Christ is your Shepherd.”

Q6 — “What do you believe repentance looks like for you right now?”

- **If repentance is present:** “In the name of Christ, I forgive you.”
- **If repentance is absent:** “God calls you urgently to turn from this.”

CLOSING

“I want to walk with you in this. Let’s stay connected. I will pray for you, and I invite you to return for confession, Scripture, and the Lord’s Supper.”