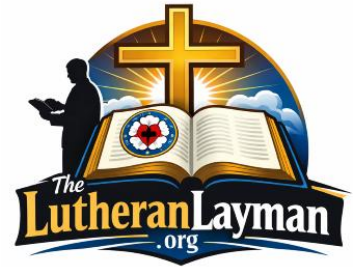


The Danger of Mixing Law, Gospel, and Sanctification



1. Why This Topic Matters

Few things damage Christian faith more subtly than mixing what God never meant to mix.

Martin Luther (in his Small Catechism) called the proper distinction between Law and Gospel the highest art in Christendom. Without it, we either despair (thinking we can never please God) or become proud (thinking we can earn His favor). C.F.W. Walther (“The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel”) taught that **confusing Law and Gospel is the root of every false doctrine** and leads to spiritual confusion and loss of comfort in Christ. When we add Sanctification into that confusion, Christians lose assurance, and their life becomes distorted—either into pride or despair.

This handout summarizes:

- What the Law, Gospel, and Sanctification are
- How they differ
- What happens when they are mixed
- Why keeping them distinct brings comfort and clarity

2. Definitions

A. The Law (SOS – Shows Our Sin)

- God’s commands
- Shows what we must do & God’s expectations, demands perfection.
- Shows our inability to please God, creates despair
- Reveals sin and God’s wrath
- Always accuses
- Cannot save

Key passages: Rom 3:20; Gal 3:10; Matt 22:37–40

B. The Gospel (SOS – Shows Our Savior)

- God’s promises in Christ
- Announces what Christ has done
- Gives forgiveness, life, and salvation
- Creates and sustains faith
- Contains no demands
- Offers comfort to the broken

Key passages: Romans 1:16; Ephesians 2:8–9; John 3:16

C. Sanctification

- The Spirit’s work *after* justification
- The new obedience that flows from the Gospel
- Never perfect in this life
- Fruit of faith, not the cause
- Never the basis of assurance

Key passages: Galatians 5:22–25; Romans 12:1–2; John 15:5

*“The **LAW** is God’s Word which tells us what to do and what not to do and the punishment for breaking it. The **GOSPEL** is God’s Word which tells of His great love in Jesus Whom He sent to die to save us from our sins.”*

*Luther’s Small Catechism,
Sydow edition, Questions 14 & 16*

3. Common Ways These Are Mixed

1. Mixing Law into the Gospel

Examples:

- “God will forgive you *if* you try your best.”
- “God will forgive you *if* you are sorry enough.”
- “Your good works assure you of your salvation.”
- “Jesus died for you, so now you must prove you’re worthy.”
- “Faith plus obedience makes you right with God.”

Danger: Turns the Gospel into a conditional contract. Shifts assurance from Christ to the self. It destroys assurance and creates either pride or despair.

2. Mixing Gospel into the Law

Examples:

- “God wouldn’t command anything too difficult.”
- “God loves you as you are, and is pleased if you try your best”
- “The Law is just helpful advice.”
- “The Gospel is about life transformation”
- “God knows your heart, so He doesn’t really expect perfection.”

Danger: Weakens repentance. Diminishes the seriousness of sin. Makes Christ’s cross unnecessary.

3. Mixing Sanctification into Justification

Examples:

- “Your holiness proves you’re truly saved.”
- “If you don’t see spiritual growth, maybe you’re not a Christian.”
- “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle.”
- “True Christians don’t struggle with that sin.”

Danger: Makes salvation depend on our performance. Replaces Christ’s finished work with our ongoing work. It makes the Christian life the center instead of Christ. Produces either pride or despair.

4. Warnings Against Mixing

- Galatians 1:6–7 — ⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ”.
- Galatians 3:3 — “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”

4. Why We Are Tempted to Mix Them

- Human nature seeks self-justification
- The Gospel seems “too free”
- Sanctification feels measurable
- We/Others want visible results
- The old Adam wants to contribute to salvation

Walther: **Rightly dividing Law and Gospel is the highest art in Christianity.**

5. Practical Scenarios

A. The Christian Filled With Guilt

“I’ve committed a terrible sin. I don’t think that God will forgive me.”

“I keep failing. I don’t think God can forgive me anymore.”

Correct approach:

- Law: Sin is real.
- Gospel: Christ forgives sinners.
- Sanctification: The Spirit continues His work.

Incorrect mixture:

- “Try harder and God will forgive you.”

B. The Proud Christian

“I’m doing better than most people.” (Comparative Christianity)

Correct approach:

- Law: God demands perfection.
- Gospel: Christ alone is your righteousness.
- Sanctification: Good works are God’s work in you, not your achievement.

Incorrect mixture:

- “Your obedience shows you’re more saved than others.”

C. The Struggling Christian

“Why am I not growing faster?”

Correct approach:

- Gospel: Your standing before God is secure in Christ.
- Sanctification: Growth is slow, uneven, and Spirit-driven.

Incorrect mixture:

- “Your lack of progress means your faith is weak.”

6. What Happens When They Are Kept Distinct

The Law

Exposes sin
Crushes pride
Drives us to Christ

The Gospel

Comforts the conscience
Gives assurance
Creates joy and faith

Sanctification

Flows naturally from the Gospel
Is Spirit driven, not self-driven
Never is a condition for salvation

7. The Comfort of Keeping Them Distinct

When Law, Gospel, and sanctification are kept in their proper places:

- The Law humbles
- The Gospel comforts
- Sanctification blossoms
- Christ remains the center
- Assurance is preserved
- The Christian life becomes joyful rather than anxious

8. How to Recognize Confusion in Real Life

In Preaching

- Too much Law without Gospel → despair
- Too much Gospel without Law → complacency
- Gospel conditioned on behavior → legalism
- Sanctification preached as the Gospel → moralism

In Personal Devotion

- “God must be disappointed in me; I need to do better before I pray.”
- “I don’t feel forgiven, so maybe I’m not.”
- “If I were a real Christian, I wouldn’t struggle.”

In Evangelism

- “Come to Jesus and He’ll fix your life.”
- “Stop sinning and God will accept you.”

9. The Proper Order

Law → Gospel → Sanctification

1. **Law** exposes sin
2. **Gospel** forgives and creates faith
3. **Sanctification** flows from faith as fruit

Reversing the order destroys the Gospel.

Core Insight:

**Anything that shifts confidence from Christ to self
—even slightly— is a deadly mixture.**



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