GOD'S WORD IS LIFE

READING THE BIBLE AS LAW AND GOSPEL:
THE WORD THAT READS US

SESSION THREE: THE GOSPEL AS PROMISE

Central Question

What happens when the Gospel is not merely explained to us, but spoken to us as God's promise?

Central Claim

The Gospel is not another set of instructions for becoming acceptable to God. It is God's promise of forgiveness, righteousness, and life through Jesus Christ. The promise does not merely tell us about salvation. It gives us Christ and his benefits.

I. FROM THE LAW TO THE GOSPEL

Romans 3:19–24 19

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

The Law exposes our sin and brings our attempts at self-justification to an end. The Gospel is not God's assistance in completing that failed project. It announces what God has accomplished for us in Jesus Christ.

Key distinction: The Law demands righteousness. The Gospel gives the righteousness of Christ.

For Discussion: Why are we inclined to turn the Gospel into another set of religious

obligations?

II. THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

Romans 3:21–26

Righteousness through Faith

21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus,

Last week, we saw that Paul introduces the Gospel with the words, "But now." Something new has happened through Jesus Christ.

- Righteousness is received, not achieved. Not grace for righteousness but grace as righteousness.
- Justification rests upon Christ's death and resurrection.
- Our standing before God depends upon Christ rather than our religious accomplishments.

Luther describes this as an *alien righteousness*, a righteousness that comes from outside ourselves.

For Discussion: How does receiving righteousness differ from trying to become righteous before God?

III. GOD JUSTIFIES THE UNGODLY

Romans 4:1–8

The Example of Abraham

4 What then shall we say about[a] Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." 4 Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. 5 And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. 6 So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

7 "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;
8 blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin."

Paul's astonishing claim is that God "justifies the ungodly" (Romans 4:5).

Faith is not the one remaining religious achievement required to make God's forgiveness effective. Faith receives what the promise gives, and faith itself comes through hearing the Word of Christ. Romans 10:17 **So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.**

Central insight: The certainty of salvation rests upon Christ's promise, not upon the strength or sincerity of our faith.

For Discussion: What happens when Christians begin examining the quality of their faith rather than trusting the promise of Christ?

IV. THE GOSPEL IS A WORD SPOKEN TO SOMEONE

Luke 7:36– 36 One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house, and took his place at table. 37 And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, 38 and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."

40 And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "What is it, Teacher?" 41 "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

48 And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" 50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."50

At Simon the Pharisee's table, Jesus encounters a woman known as a sinner.

Simon judges her according to her reputation. Jesus speaks forgiveness to her.

"Your sins are forgiven."

The distinction is between explaining forgiveness as a theological doctrine and actually proclaiming forgiveness to a sinner.

The woman's love is not the price of forgiveness. It is the response of one who has received mercy.

For Discussion: What is the difference between hearing that God forgives sinners and hearing, "Your sins are forgiven for Christ's sake"?

V. THE PROMISE DOES WHAT IT SAYS

2 Corinthians 5:17–21

17 Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation;[a] the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling[b] the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

God's Word does more than communicate religious information. When Christ's promise is proclaimed, God is at work through that Word.

Paul describes the proclamation of reconciliation as a ministry entrusted to the church.

- Scripture testifies to God's saving work in Jesus Christ.
- Preaching delivers that promise to actual hearers.
- The authority of the promise rests upon Christ, not upon the abilities of the preacher or the feelings of the hearer.

For Discussion: Can a sermon explain the doctrine of justification accurately and still fail to proclaim the Gospel?

VI. THE PROMISE COMES TO US

The Christian life is not begun by grace and then maintained by religious accomplishment.

God continues to give Christ through his Word and sacraments.

Preaching and Absolution: Christ's forgiveness is announced to sinners.

Holy Baptism: We are joined to Christ's death and resurrection.

The Lord's Supper: Christ gives his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.

These are not achievements or acts of the free will by which we make ourselves worthy of God. They are means through which God gives his promise.

For Discussion: Why is it important that God's promise comes to us through something outside our own religious experience?

VII. CHRIST HAS THE FINAL WORD

Romans 8:1

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

The Law tells the truth about our sin. The Gospel announces what is true for us because of Jesus Christ.

Justification does not rest upon our improvement, our sincerity, or the adequacy of our faith. It rests upon the crucified and risen Christ.

The Gospel's final word is not a demand for something more from us, but the promise of what Christ has already accomplished for us.

THE DISTINCTION TO REMEMBER

THE LAW	THE GOSPEL
Commands	Promises
Demands righteousness	Gives righteousness
Exposes sin	Forgives sin
Accuses the sinner	Justifies the ungodly
Reveals our need	Gives us Christ

A Question to Take Home

When you read Scripture, are you primarily looking for something God wants you to accomplish, or are you listening for what God is giving you in Jesus Christ?

Both Law and Gospel are God's Word. The task is not to avoid the Law, but to hear each Word for what it actually does.