GOD'S WORD IS LIFE

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

SESSION TWO: THE WORD THAT KILLS: READING THE LAW

Central Question

What does the Law actually do?

Central Claim

The Law is not God's instruction for better living. It is God's Word that demands righteousness, exposes sin, and brings our efforts to justify ourselves to an end. The Law is good and necessary, but it cannot give what it demands.

I. OUR FIRST INSTINCT: WHAT MUST I DO?

Mark 10:17–27

17 "And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" 20 And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth." 21 And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." 22 At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.

23 And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" 24 And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is[a] to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." 26 And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" 27 Jesus looked at them and said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God."

A wealthy man approaches Jesus with a familiar religious question:

"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus directs him to the commandments. The man believes he has kept them. Then Jesus tells him to sell what he owns, give to the poor, and follow him.

The man walks away grieving.

Consider:

1. What does the man believe he needs from Jesus?
2. Why does Jesus give him a command he cannot bear to obey?
3. Is Jesus offering him a more demanding program for salvation or bringing his entire project to an end?

The Point

The man's question assumes that eternal life is something he can secure by doing what is required. Jesus takes that assumption with complete seriousness and exposes its impossibility.

The disciples ask, ***"Then who can be saved?"***

Jesus answers: ***"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God."***

The Law brings us to the end of what we can do.

II. THE LAW IS MORE THAN RULES

Romans 3:19–20

"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."

We ordinarily think of Law as commandments, moral principles, or instructions for proper conduct.

But Scripture presents the Law as something far more radical: **God's Word addressed to us as demand and judgment.**

The Law does two necessary kinds of work.

In earthly life, the Law:

- Restrains evil and protects the neighbor.
- Establishes boundaries for human conduct.
- Orders life within families, communities, and society.
- Calls us to responsible action in the world.

Before God, the Law:

- Exposes our sin.
- Accuses us without allowing excuses.
- Reveals the impossibility of achieving our own righteousness.
- Brings the sinner's claim to self-justification to an end.

The first is the Law's *civil work*. The second is its *theological work*.

The Law is therefore not limited to passages containing commandments. Biblical narratives, teachings, and judgments may also confront us with God's demand.

The question is not merely, "What does this passage instruct me to do?" but "What is God's Word doing to me?"

III. THE LAW ALWAYS ACCUSES

Matthew 5: 43–48

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not make the Law easier.

He makes escape impossible.

Jesus concludes:

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Our instinct is to reduce these demands to something manageable. We prefer commandments we might reasonably expect to keep.

Why?

Because an achievable Law allows us to remain in control of our standing before God.

But the Law is not satisfied with improvement. It demands righteousness.

The Law always accuses (lex semper accusat). Even when it rightly directs our earthly conduct, before God it exposes the sinner who cannot fulfill its demands.

Consider:

1. Why do we prefer achievable commandments?
2. What happens when God's demand is allowed to stand without qualification?

The Law does not merely tell us that we have made mistakes. It takes away our claim to be our own saviors.

IV. THE BOUND WILL: WHY MORE LAW CANNOT SAVE

Romans 7:7–13, 18–19

7 What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." 8 But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died; 10 the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me. 12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

Paul describes something deeper than an occasional failure to do the right thing.

"I can will what is right, but I cannot do it."

Our problem is not simply that we lack adequate moral information.

We know considerably more about what we ought to do than we actually do.

Luther's understanding of the *bondage of the will* presses the problem further.

The sinner is not a neutral person waiting for better instructions or greater motivation. We are turned inward upon ourselves, continually seeking to secure, defend, or establish our own righteousness.

Our religious efforts can become part of that struggle.

We want to be the ones who finally get ourselves right with God.

But the Law cannot free us from this captivity.

It can reveal our condition. It can condemn our pretensions. It can leave us without a defense.

It cannot give us the righteousness it demands.

Consider:

Why might even our sincere attempts to become better Christians become another way of trying to justify ourselves?

V. THREE WAYS WE ESCAPE THE LAW

When Scripture accuses us, we instinctively look for a way out.

1. Moralism — Turning the Law into Advice

We reduce God's absolute demand to practical instructions for improving our lives.

Instead of hearing the judgment, we hear a manageable assignment.

2. Comparison — Making the Law About Others

We identify someone worse than ourselves.

The Pharisee, the hypocrite, the rich man, or the obvious sinner becomes the object of the accusation.

We escape by deciding that the passage is primarily about someone else.

3. Spiritual Progress — Measuring Our Improvement

We turn the Law into a ladder of spiritual advancement.

The important question becomes whether we are growing, improving, or becoming sufficiently faithful.

Once again, we place ourselves at the center.

What do all three have in common?

They preserve our conviction that, with enough effort, we can eventually establish our righteousness.

Luther's decisive insight is that the Law does not exist to make this project successful.

It brings the project itself to an end.

VI. READING A FAMILIAR STORY AGAIN

Luke 10:25–37

25 And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read?" 27 And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." 28 And he said to him, "You have answered right; do this, and you will live."

29 But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, 34 and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 And the next day he took out two denarii[a] and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' 36 Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" 37 He said, "The one who showed mercy on him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Notice how the story begins.

A lawyer asks Jesus, ***"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"***

Doing is the key term.

Jesus directs him to the Law: Love God completely and love your neighbor as yourself.

Then comes a revealing sentence:

"But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" (Luke 10:29)

The lawyer wants to establish the limits of his obligation.

Jesus refuses to give him those limits.

First Reading: Moral Instruction

The familiar lesson is that we should behave like the Good Samaritan.

Show kindness. Help strangers. Care for people in need.

This is genuine and necessary Law.

Second Reading: The Law Without Escape

Now let the command stand in its full force.

Love the neighbor without qualification.

Love the inconvenient neighbor.

Love the enemy.

Love without calculating personal advantage.

Love as completely as God commands.

Consider:

1. Why does the lawyer want to define who qualifies as his neighbor?
2. What happens when Jesus refuses to limit the command?
3. Can anyone stand before God claiming to have fulfilled this Law?

The story does not permit us to justify ourselves by drawing boundaries around our obligations.

And Jesus' concluding command, ***"Go and do likewise,"*** is not an offer of salvation through moral achievement.

The Law leaves the lawyer, and us, without a defense.

CLOSING: WHEN THE LAW HAS FINISHED ITS WORK

Return to 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.

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,…"

Paul writes that the Law speaks so that ***"every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God."***

There is no final argument left to make.

But Paul does not end there.

"But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed."

These two words **But now** mark the decisive turn.

The Gospel does not offer to help us finish the project we have failed to complete.

It announces what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ for those who cannot justify themselves.

Closing Proclamation

The Law has no commission to save you. It may instruct you, restrain you, accuse you, and finally strip away everything by which you hoped to justify yourself.

But the Law does not have the last word.

Christ does.

And Christ does not come to congratulate those who have succeeded in making themselves righteous. He comes to justify the ungodly.

What the Law demands but cannot give, the Gospel gives freely in Jesus Christ.

FOR NEXT WEEK

Session Three: The Word That Makes Alive: Reading the Gospel

If the Law brings our efforts at self-justification to an end, what does the Gospel actually give—and how does it give it?