

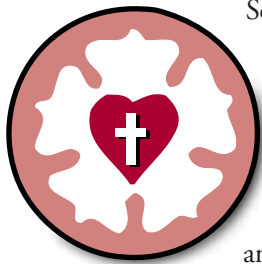
# PREACH

*the Word*

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## Preaching that Deserves the Name Lutheran



Some years back a man from one of the synod's rural congregations wrote a letter to the homiletics department. He complimented the seminary on the high caliber of young men it was sending into the ministry. But he suggested that too many new pastors were preaching about the gospel rather than preaching the gospel. He heard from the pulpit that God loves and that God saves, but he did not hear how or why.

Or he heard the doctrinal and mechanical details of God's plan of salvation, but the pastor left Jesus Christ 2,000 years and 10,000 miles away. Believe me, it was quite a letter.

Looking back over 25 years of evaluating student sermons reminds me that the comment most frequently noted on sermon manuscripts when I returned them to their student authors was: "Explicit law and explicit gospel content of this sermon is slim." Law/gospel content is the distinguishing mark of preaching that deserves the name Lutheran. The man after whom our church is named said it better than I can:

"When the Lord God wants to make us happy he first of all makes us sad. When he wants to make us rich he first of all makes us poor. And when he wants to give us life he first of all lets us die."

### Preaching God's law

Luther's words point to the need, first of all, to preach God's law explicitly. How does one do that? Every preacher knows the temptation, when writing a sermon, to list a few examples of sins against the Second Table, and then to imagine he's preached specific law. ("Yes, we all know we've done things we shouldn't have done. We hold on to grudges, and we harbor hate. We're tempted to cast hungry glances at sexy pictures, and to cheat on Form 1040, and . . .").

Preaching God's law explicitly does not and dare not stop with singling out a few symptoms of the deadly malady we brought with us into the world. A doctor is interested in his patient's symptoms (a fever, maybe), but only because that fever tells him there's an infection in the patient's body. My sermon's diagnosis of the problem afflicting the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve dare not stop with the Second Table. It must inevitably move to the First Table. Cite "Second Table symptoms" of sinning against one's neighbor, if you

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# PREACH

*the Word*

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wish, but cite them only as symptoms of a far deeper malady.

### **Preaching the law explicitly means identifying the malady**

When the Creator fashioned the first human beings, he designed them to live under him as servants, not alongside him as rivals. God gave Adam and Eve many blessings, but equality with him was not one of them. God does not want a rival, and he will not tolerate rivals. “Be still, and know that I am God!” It was precisely at this point that Satan directed his initial attack, when he whispered: “Do what I say, and you will be like God.” The one principle of hell is: “I am my own boss.”

Here was the sin of our first parents: they wanted a status God had not granted them. They weren’t satisfied with being creatures, but wanted to play God. Ironic, isn’t it? Dogs are content with their dogginess, and sheep with their sheepishness, but not humans. We’re forever wanting to be more than God made us to be, more than creatures. We want to be the master of our fate, the captain of our soul, to play God—the very thing God forbids in his First Commandment. There are many things that God will put up with in the human heart, but second place is not one of them.

### **Preaching the law explicitly means announcing the consequences**

Is it any wonder that in Eden God responded by saying: “There cannot be two Gods! The pretender, the rebel, must die”? Each of us must confess to a proud love affair with ourselves. That’s what sin is. Sin is living as though we acknowledge no Creator, as if we had no other purpose in life than to be comfortable, as if we were accountable to no one but

ourselves. Sin is our appetite for recognition, which robs God of his rightful place at the center of our lives. The attitudes just described cancel prayer, doom us to a restless life of self-service, and fix our inheritance after death. We may deny our sin, try to excuse it or to forget about it or to make up for it, but it won’t go away. Like hazardous waste, buried and forgotten, sin contaminates my heart, poisons my memory, and puts me under the curse of God. This is what the law of God announces. And this is what a Lutheran sermon must announce.

### **God hates the sinner**

Preaching God’s law explicitly means making clear that God hates not only sin, but that he hates the sinner, every sinner. David confesses to God in Psalm 5: “You hate all who do wrong.” And that wasn’t just a slip of David’s pen, either. Hosea says the same thing (9:15), and so does Jeremiah (12:8), and Isaiah (63:10). In a meditation in a synodical publication a few months back the writer stated that God’s law “scolds us.” Wrong. God’s law doesn’t slap our wrists; it puts us under God’s curse. It damns. It kills. Walther wrote: “We must preach people into hell before we can preach them into heaven” (*Law and Gospel*, p. 118).

That’s what makes it so hard to preach the revealed truth of God explicitly. It always humbles us before it helps us. It shames us before it saves us. It accuses us before it acquits us. The only true God is a holy God, without a trace of wrong. He will always be a God who must threaten to punish all sin, and who must therefore punish me. The message of God’s law is a message that can only make any thinking person tremble.

That’s what makes it so difficult to be a preacher. You enter the pulpit with a burden on your heart every time. You know before you ever start that what you have to say is going to hurt the very people you want to help, and that there’s no other way to help them.

### **Preaching explicit gospel**

Your goal in planning the worship service, however, is not to make sure your hearers walk out of the sanctuary after 60 minutes looking like a sad litter of whipped puppies. After the Israelites left Egypt, Mt. Sinai was not the end of the road for them. The law of God is not God’s final word to the human race. It’s an important word, a word that must be heard, but it’s not the last word.

Princeton Seminary’s Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies recently studied the reasons for the ineffectiveness of so much of today’s preaching. One of the reasons identified was: “Too much bad news, not enough good news.” A layman asked preachers: “Why do you give 18 minutes to an analysis of man’s need for the gospel, and only two minutes to the gospel as the answer to the need?” Another commented: “The impression many laymen have is that the only message preachers have is one of what’s wrong with



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the world. Hearers are left wondering: “Where is the good news?”

It’s a fair question, and Lutheran theology has the only biblical answer. The One who has the right to condemn you found a way to pardon you without violating his own perfect standard of justice. God accomplished this by means of the principle of substitution. Jesus Christ came to our world and traded places with us. According to Lutheran theology, the gospel consists of a magnificent cluster of truths. Sermons must present these truths if they’re to deserve the name Lutheran.

### **Explicit gospel: Christ’s active obedience**

We’ll want to be sure our sermons state clearly that Christ’s work on our behalf involved a double substitution. Christ first of all came to our world and lived life right. He met the holy demands of God, which we couldn’t meet. He did this so that God might credit the holiness of his Son as a free gift to all. When was the last time my hearers heard me mention the truth about Christ’s active obedience?

### **Explicit gospel: Christ’s passive obedience**

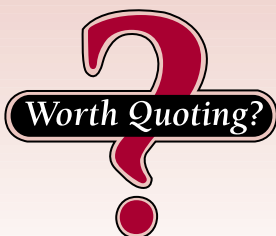
All during his life Christ did what we had not done. On that awful Friday we call “Good,” he did the exact opposite: he undid what we had done. Christ died our death under God’s curse. In our place he was damned; he went to hell. Because Christ took our place under God’s law and under God’s curse, we can stand upright under God’s judgment.

### **Explicit gospel: Christ’s merit is imputed to us**

Because everything God’s law demands has been given to God by Christ, sinners are credited with having met God’s requirements and suffered his curse. Justification is a forensic act. God looks upon us not as the sinners we are, but as the saints he originally designed us to be. Furthermore, in Christ’s perfect life and innocent death God declared *an entire world* righteous. (Dr. Siegbert Becker used to call that “the ultimate evidence of the grace of God”).

### **Explicit gospel: Christ’s merit is ours only through the means**

You and I are spiritual sons of a man who said: “God does not wish to deal with us apart from the gospel in word and sacraments.” Now it’s true that God may on occasion use demonstrations of force (the flood, or the firestorm at Sodom and Gomorrah). But his real work comes to people in a quiet word. God channels his grace to us through the water of baptism, through the feeble words of a preacher, through pennies’ worth of bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper.



***Jesus Christ not only reconciled God and man. He reconciled law and gospel.***

*Martin Luther*



## **UNINTENTIONAL GOSPEL OMISSIONS**

### **1. token gospel preaching**

perfunctory, minimal, oblique references to what “the grace of God” accomplished “through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ;” talking about the gospel instead of proclaiming the good news.

### **2. cliché gospel preaching**

never venturing beyond familiar formulas (e.g., John 3:16, Luther’s Explanation to the Second Article), modes of expression the preacher has grown comfortable with.

### **3. conditional gospel preaching**

attaching some condition to God’s offer of forgiveness distorts the offer and insults the giver (“If you will believe . . .,” “If you will repent . . .,” “If you will invite Christ into your heart . . .”).

### **4. incomplete gospel preaching**

- a. much about the crucifixion, little about the resurrection;
- b. presenting only the creedal facts, little about their significance;
- c. speaking about the gospel when preaching about conversion and justification, but omitting it in the context of sanctification;
- d. eschatological overemphasis; speaking of “being saved” as though it lies only in the future; equating “being saved” with “going to heaven;” restricting the “life” Jesus came to bring us to eternal life.

## Preaching: Deductive or Inductive

I have the sneaking suspicion that most of us, perhaps without thinking much about it, preach deductively. **Deductive preaching** begins with a statement of the main point(s) of the sermon. From there it proceeds to prove the validity of what the preacher has determined to be the chief thrust of the sermon text. Many of us were trained to announce the sermon's theme and major parts up front (or at least at the beginning of each major division of the sermon). That's deductive preaching. It begins where the preacher is.

By contrast, **inductive preaching** starts where the people are. Induction is the reasoning process by which particular elements (narrative, dialog, parable, analogy, questions) lead to the drawing of conclusions. Inductive preaching postpones declarations and assertions until the listeners have had a chance to weigh the evidence, think through the implications, and then reach the conclusions along with the preacher.

### DEDUCTIVE

1. begins where the speaker is
2. begins with answers, solutions, and propositions from Scripture
3. leans on formal, logical sequence
4. examples follow argument
5. sometimes comes across as dogmatic (maybe even authoritarian)

or

### INDUCTIVE

1. begins where the listener is
2. asks questions, presents evidence; withholds propositional material until the analogy makes the point
3. creates analogies via parable, examples from life
4. builds listener agreement before asserting, exhorting
5. leads the listener to reach the conclusion with the speaker; involves the listener in the learning process

Take a few moments out to read Matthew 12:3 & 8; Luke 5:34 and 10:29-37 to see how Jesus used the inductive method to teach. He responded to the Pharisees' accusations by first asking questions, and only then asserting his lordship. In response to the question: "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told a parable, asked a question, and then drew the obvious conclusion: "Go and do likewise."

I confess that the longer I serve in the ministry, the more attractive inductive preaching has become to me. It's been my experience that inductive sermons produce a sense of discovery in listeners, as though they arrived at the sermon's propositional truth on their own. Try it some time. As you write out your sermon, (or even if you don't write out your sermon), don't announce major sermon divisions up front. Let them grow out of your development of the material for that major part. Try it; you might like it. You might just find yourself alternating using the inductive method with the deductive to present your message. May the Spirit touch your heart, your hand, and your tongue.

