

# PREACH

the Word

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## ENLIGHTENED BY DARKNESS

The next time you want your sweetheart to experience the sensation of fine dining, take the candlelight dinner to a new level. Snuff the candles. For that matter, darken the room altogether.

“Dark dining” events are catching on at U.S. restaurants. This experimental cuisine movement emerged from Germany and Switzerland in the late 1990s and spread to over 20 European cities including London, Paris, Vienna, and Moscow according to an article in the July 13, 2007 edition of *USA Today*.

Diners eat a multi-course meal either blindfolded or in a blacked-out room where they are served by blind waiters. The intent is a “new sensory experience” that darkens one sense in order to enlighten another. You may have never noticed the savory flavor blends in pecan-orange crusted salmon before because you’ve been too busy eyeing up that sizzling fajita plate being served at the next table or checking out the other dining patrons.

No need to tell that to Benjamin Uphues, head of Opaque-Dining in the Dark ([darkdining.com](http://darkdining.com)). Uphues charges customers \$99 for a three course meal with wine and the dinners are always fully booked weeks in advance.

Now, I am not promising you that your pews will be filled to capacity each Sunday but there’s something preachers can learn from this. Sometimes less is more.

In this, the eleventh volume of *Preach the Word*, the point of emphasis will be focused law and gospel. Explicit. Specific. Textual. Whatever you want to call it, preaching focused law and gospel means darkening certain stimuli that we’ve come to consider normal, even essential, in our sermons.

All that means is that the light shines even more brightly elsewhere.

*Daron Lindemann*



## WHAT IS FOCUSED LAW AND GOSPEL?

Preaching with focused law and gospel means we are not satisfied tossing around general statements about hell and heaven, sin and grace, sinners and Jesus. Such statements may be true and treasured indeed, but they usually don’t serve and support the textual message of that sermon on that day. Focused law and gospel point to:

- a specific sin on the part of particular people that separates them from God,
- God’s specific judgment on those particular people for that sin,
- God’s specific resolution for those particular people regarding that judgment, and
- God’s specific blessings ready and available for those particular people as part of his resolution.

## MAJOR FOCUS IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

Twelve men of God collectively wrote about as many chapters in the Bible as Isaiah wrote in his book alone. Late in the 4th century somebody designated them as the *minor* prophets and the title stuck. But what these little gems lack in volume they make up for in concise, dramatic, eloquent, and poignant messages. Nowhere else in Scripture will you hear more focused law and gospel within the span of 67 chapters.

Listen to the Lord God preach focused law and gospel through some of the minor prophets! Which of the four components on the front page do you think is emphasized in each of the following statements?

### Hosea

"The Israelites are stubborn, like a stubborn heifer. How then can the LORD pasture them like lambs in the meadow?" (4:16).

"O Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols? I will answer him and care for him. I am like a green pine tree; your fruitfulness comes from me" (14:8).

### Amos

"I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them" (5:21,22).

"In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be ... I will bring back my exiled people Israel" (9:11,14).

### Obadiah

"You who say to yourself, 'Who can bring me down to the ground?' Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down" (4).

"And the kingdom will be the LORD's" (21).

### Micah

"Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they lean upon the LORD and say, 'Is not the LORD among us? No disaster will come upon us.' Therefore, because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets" (3:11,12).

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" (5:2).

### Zephaniah

"Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled! She obeys no



one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God" (3:1-2)

"The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing ... 'At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes,' says the LORD" (3:17-20).

### Haggai

"You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?' declares the LORD Almighty. 'Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house'" (1:9).

"I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty. 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty" (2:7-9).

### Zechariah

"When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,' says the LORD Almighty" (7:13)

"The Sovereign LORD will sound the trumpet; he will march in the storms of the south and the LORD Almighty will shield them.... The LORD their God will save them on that day as the flock of his people" (9:14-16).

## NEW! DISCUSSION BOARD FOR PREACHERS

*Preach the Word* has created a space on the internet for preachers to collaborate, discuss, question, and share. Log on to [www.wels.net/ptw](http://www.wels.net/ptw) and click on the link to explore the new discussion board. The page includes a welcome message that provides more details about using this exciting new tool for your preaching, including how to log into the board as a new user.

The discussion board asks users to post good examples of focused law and gospel, and to respond as desired. Check it out!

## SAMPLE SERMON

Take note of the focused law and gospel of the sermon portion in the left column below from Luke 15:11-32. Editorial comments in the right column offer some explanation.

SERMON	COMMENTS
<p>Jewish law would not allow a man to give his inheritance to his family until “the hour of death.” Even if a man transferred his property to his sons, they could not sell it until after he died. This younger son not only demanded (demanded!) his share of the estate while his father was in evident good health; he insisted on the right to dispose of it as soon as he could. In effect, he was saying to his father, “Drop dead!”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <i>Squandering his wealth was a foolish sin of the younger son, but how he got his wealth was a rebellious one. If you’re preaching this parable on Stewardship Sunday then focus on the squandering, otherwise, like this sermon, the rebellion and disrespect ought not be ignored.</i></li> </ul>
<p>As he made his way home he rehearsed his appeal: “Make me like one of your hired men.” But he never got to say it. His father saw him when he was still on the edge of the city. Anyone in the Middle East with an ounce of dignity does not run, yet the father went chasing down the narrow, crowded city streets, rushing to reach his son before his son reached the village, to shield him publicly from townspeople who had neither forgotten nor forgiven what he had done. The father hugged him and kissed him for everyone to see. No talk now about becoming a hired craftsman. There was nothing the younger son could do to earn his father’s love, and in this great outpouring of compassion and forgiveness, finally he could see he did not even need to try.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <i>This focused gospel answers the rebellion of the son with the compassion of the father.</i></li> </ul>
<p>Do you see yourself in the younger son? In a sense we are all younger sons, spoiled and bratty children, who have told our Father, “I want things my way! Why don’t you drop dead?” And in the estrangement of our own distant countries we have often foolishly assumed we could perform some sort of hired labor to reinstate ourselves in his good graces. But the Father never stopped loving us. He found us and forgave us. The past is past. Let the party begin.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <i>Focused and very textual. Making the son’s sin and forgiveness our own.</i></li> </ul>
<p>This story isn’t only about the “prodigal” son; it’s about <i>both</i> sons. In fact, the climax of the story comes in what happens to the older brother. He refused to join the party, bitterly defended his flawless performance as the firstborn, and accused his brother of blowing the family fortune on hookers. Now the truth came clear: the father had <i>two</i> lost sons. Though the older brother had remained physically within his father’s house, emotionally he was as much in a distant country as his younger brother had ever been. He viewed life with his father as a kind of slavery and he assumed that his share of the inheritance would be awarded to him for his good behavior. Yet this very day he had failed every duty of an eldest son. He had not assisted his father in his celebration; he had grieved his father publicly by refusing to join him in welcoming his brother; he had shamed his father in front of all his invited guests.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <i>The same sin of rebellion manifests itself in different form. Good focused law preaching. Too many different sins in one sermon easily become a “more is less” scenario.</i></li> </ul>
<p>But for the second time that day, this father did something unheard of among men in the Middle East. He went out to his older son and kept on pleading with him to share his joy. “You’ve never stopped being my son. Everything I have is yours.” The father forgave <i>both</i> his sons. The older brother’s self-righteousness had not annulled his sonship any more than the younger brother’s excesses. “You have always been alive to me,” his father assured him. “But now your younger brother is alive again too.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <i>The sermon keeps its focus on the surprising actions of a compassionate father.</i></li> </ul>
<p>Do you see yourself in the older brother? Do you see your service in the kingdom as an enslavement, a gloomy but obligatory bargain you must strike with God? You agree to do this and give up that, and in return, he promises to reward you after you die? Have you ever grumbled that forgiveness flows too freely? That “sinners” get off too easily? That delinquents are restored too quickly? Does it irk you that after you have “borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day” (to borrow a phrase from another of Jesus’ parables), some loafer gets to slink in right before quitting time? There may be more of the older brother in us than we are comfortable admitting.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <i>This paragraph makes the sin of the older son real and relevant. It could be more focused and direct if the questions of possibility were statements of fact. “There may be more of the older brother in us . . .” invites a response from the hearer like, “Yeah, maybe, but maybe not.”</i></li> </ul>
<p>Quite naturally, readers have seen in this father the wondrous compassion and forgiveness of the Heavenly Father; rightly so. Yet when you see how this father willingly shamed himself for his sons – how he was willing, in fact, to “die” for both of them so they could live – do you also see the self-sacrificing love of the Son of God? Ultimately, in this great parable of grace, Jesus wants all of us to see ourselves. And he wants us, above all, to see him.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <i>Another surprise for the listener that focuses on the specific gospel of the text to enlighten the sacrificial death of Jesus.</i></li> </ul>

## WALTHER: HOW TO PREACH LAW AND GOSPEL

On September 19, 1884 Walther explained what he believed to be six differences between the law and the gospel. The fifth difference concerns the effects of the two doctrines. If we pay attention to these effects we'll improve our law and gospel preaching.

"The Law tells us what to do, but does not enable us to comply with its commands" (pp. 13-14). Preach the law so directly that no listener can think he or she has kept it. Can the law do its work best when posed in question form (e.g. "Do you worry too much?")?

"The Law uncovers to man his sins, but offers him no help to get out of them and thus hurls man into despair." Preach the law so that its curse is inescapable by any sinner. It should offer no hope. "The Law ... conjures up the terrors of hell, of death, of the wrath of God. But it has not a drop of comfort to offer the sinner" (p. 14).

"The Gospel, when demanding faith, offers and gives us faith in that very demand" (p. 15). Preach the gospel so that you don't need to explain why it is so attractive, thereby "selling" its benefit to the listener like a peddler in the pulpit.

"The Gospel ... does not at all reprove the sinner, but takes all terror, all fear, all anguish, from him and fills him with peace and joy" (p. 16). Preach the gospel with focus to remove the specific terrors, fear, and anguish reprovved earlier by the law.

"The Gospel does not require anything good that man must furnish: not a good heart, not a good disposition, no improvement of his condition, no godliness, no love either of God or men. It issues no orders, but it changes man" (p. 16). Preach the gospel so that not a single hearer can think, "That doesn't apply to me."

(Walther, C. F. W. *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, 1986).



## LOOKING AHEAD

Consider these law or gospel focuses for the coming Sundays.

### Pentecost 16

Wisdom himself, in the form of your Savior from heaven, has satisfied God's expectations for you to be wise. It does not matter how smart you are. It does not matter if you can speak fluently in three languages or barely read. It does not matter how difficult decisions are for you to make. At your baptism God endowed you with your wisdom, Christ.

### Pentecost 17

He'd been up there over a month and the only thing the Israelites knew was that the glory of God on the mountain looked like a consuming fire. For all they could figure he was lost, or worse. But Moses wasn't lost. They were.

### Pentecost 19

We arrange our life so that it contributes to us making a better living. Instead Jesus says we should arrange making a living so that it doesn't interfere with us having a life.

### Pentecost 20

Luke rarely gets into geographical details but in this story on this day he is absolutely sure to mention right off the bat that Jesus is "on his way to Jerusalem" and "along the border between Samaria and Galilee" and "going into the village" right past where I live with my other lonely leper friends. Although Luke goes on to say that "ten men who had leprosy met him," it's really Jesus who meets the lepers. Jesus shapes his travel plans so as not to be at a distance from my illness but to meet me there. To be near. More than that, Jesus shapes my travel plans to keep me from being at a distance from him. He allows me to be infected with the leprosy of loneliness and hopelessness and illness and aggravations so that I *must* call for help, "Jesus, Master, have pity on [me]!"



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