

PREACH

the Word

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GOD LOVES YOU. MAYBE.

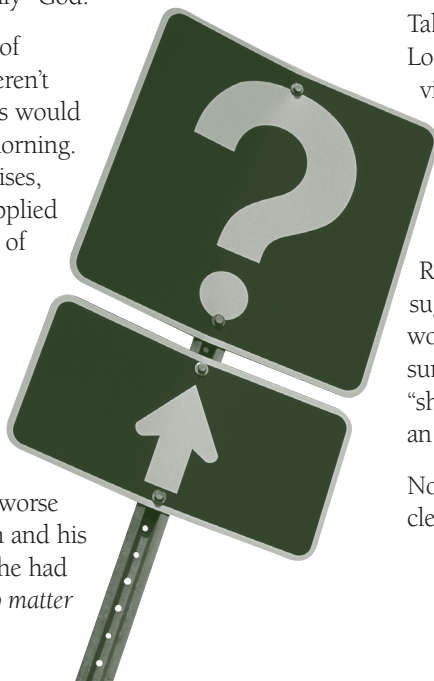
The thrill of the unknown attracts each of us. Curling up with a novel thriller during the cooler days of November allows one to disengage from stress of the ordinary, all the while wondering what's on the next page. Plopping in front of the TV for the football game of the week offers entertainment value because of the yet-to-be-determined final score. And what lies beneath the wrapping paper and pretty bows under the Christmas tree is enough to mesmerize children young and old.

But the thrill of the unknown does have its limits. Hospital visits reveal that God's people stricken with ill health often struggle less with whatever malady ails them and more with just figuring out what's wrong in the first place. If you're headed to the movies, it's not real helpful if the website for the local cinema just posts descriptions of their movie lineup and no show times.

Unpredictability and uncertainty can be frustrating. Especially for the soul.

Worshippers don't show up on Sunday to celebrate possibilities. Their faith, hope, and love aren't edified by a message that offers conditional outcomes. Not when they have put their salvation in the hands of Jehovah. He is, after all, the "I am" God, not the "I might" God or the "I will if only" God.

Ancient pagans lived in the fear of unpredictability because they weren't certain which of their many gods would wake up grumpy or tired that morning. The LORD God made clear promises, repeated them frequently, and applied them consistently. The Pharisees of Jesus' day struggled mightily to behave better than the average pious Jew, and succeeded, but still lay down at night uncertain if they'd done enough good to cover up the bad. Jesus spit at the idea of behavior making one person better than another – or worse – and from his birth to his death and his resurrection he gave everything he had to the good and the bad. *"For no matter*



how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God" (2 Corinthians 1:20).

Take another peek at the sermon you're preparing for Sunday. Look for language that allows the gambling addict or the rape victim or the child with a learning disability or the modern day Pharisee to think "I agree but that can't apply to me." And get rid of it. Put yourself in the shoes of a visitor listening to churchspeak and concluding that such fancy words must be for club members only. And communicate in unqualified terms.

Replace possibility with promise. Command obedience instead of suggesting it as something to try sometime (don't prescribe good works where the Scriptures have not, but you can call for fruit as surely as John the Baptist did). Delete "could be forgiven" and "should;" insert "are forgiven" and "will." Let your final amen be an exclamation point rather than a question mark.

Now that's a great thrill. To sound the trumpet of God's Word clearly and watch God's people line up for battle.

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 if they don't serve and support the textual message of that sermon on that day, they are best reserved for another occasion.

Focused law and gospel preaching does more than lead a Catechism lesson about the law and gospel. Focused law and gospel *preaches* the law and gospel. It afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted.

SAMPLE SERMON

Take note of the focused law and gospel of the sermon portion in the left column below from Romans 3:19-28. The enticement of this text is for the preacher to do a lot of speaking *about* the law and gospel and leave his listeners going home with a bunch of new data burned into the brain, while the heart hungers for God. You'll see examples of that as well as examples of focused law and gospel. Editorial comments in the right column offer further explanation.

SERMON	COMMENTS
<p>When Martin Luther vowed to St. Anne that he would become a monk, he was not thinking, "This will look good on the resume." When he kept that promise and entered the monastery, he didn't do so with the intent of having people five hundred years later call themselves "Lutheran." When he became a priest and celebrated the Mass, it was not his goal to make a name for himself. He had his sights set on something far more important than fame and recognition in the world, something greater than the praise of men. What he wanted, above all else, when you get right down to it, was praise from God. He wanted God to look at him and say, "There is a righteous man."</p> <p>How do we get praise from God? What do we do so that God looks at us and says, "There is a righteous person"? From the moment that we're born we know exactly how to get praise from God. It's simple. Do what God says. It's not rocket science – if you want your boss to praise you, if you want him to give you a raise, do what he says. Don't just do some of what he says. Don't just do what you want to do. Do everything that he says. Do it with a smile on your face and your boss will have to say, "There's a good worker! There's one I have to keep around!" If you want praise from God, you simply need to do what he says.</p> <p>God doesn't want anyone coming to him and saying, "Lord, let me tell you what I have done for you. Let me remind you of how well I have lived and how nice I have been to others." God wants silence.</p> <p>A person can try, try, and try again, but God will never say of such a person, "There's a righteous man."</p> <p>The law makes us aware of the fact that we are sinful.</p> <p>All have missed the mark of perfection that God set with the law. All have failed to be what God created human beings to be: perfect.</p> <p>We know that we cannot earn praise from God by our obedience to the law. Then why do we insist on keeping track of our obedience and bringing it to God?</p> <p>Think of how we respond to people who are full of themselves, who think they're God's gift to the world. We want nothing to do with them. The holy God wants nothing to do with those who are full of themselves spiritually. He hates those who bring their works to him and say, "See, look at what I have done," and expect him to be impressed. If you come to God with your works in hand and expect him to praise you, don't hold your breath. No praise will come. God will not call you righteous.</p> <p>Paul notes that true righteousness and praise comes not from self and obedience, but "from God."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ <i>Excellent introduction that captures the attention of Reformation-minded listeners, gains their interest in the theme of being righteous before God, and offers motivation for them to want to hear more (a helpful acronym for writing a good introduction is AIM as noted in bold type above). Additionally, it is a clever preaching of both law and gospel.</i> ◆ <i>This helpful illustration is accompanied by more of a description of the law's expectations than a condemnation of inadequate behavior. It is a setup and that's what the preacher intends. He'll preach focused law soon.</i> ◆ <i>Here are four examples of preaching about the law. In this case, it is legitimate because in the text Paul is making a point about the law and righteousness. Thankfully this isn't the preaching of the law in the sermon. You may argue that "all have sinned" is focused law preaching. It is not focused, but general. There is a difference between universal sin ("this world is a mess") and personal accountability ("I have sinned").</i> ◆ <i>The first sentence, a general statement of fact, is a setup for the focused law of the question that condemns.</i> ◆ <i>Here is focused law preaching. It is textual, reflecting the tone of Paul's writing. It is direct and specific with inescapable judgment.</i> ◆ <i>This is a transition. Properly used in this sermon as neither law nor gospel</i> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>(continued on next page)</i></p>

SERMON	COMMENTS
<p>Every single person who trusts in Christ receives praise from God. Of them, God says, "That person is righteous in my sight."</p> <p>The same "all" that sinned have been justified. They have been declared innocent. God has said of every sinner, "They are forgiven."</p> <p>Those who have faith in Jesus, who recognize that he did it all for them, that he accepted their sins and received their punishment, those are the ones that God praises.</p> <p>For those who hold to Christ, praise from God is a glorious reality. In Christ, God says of all who believe, "You are righteous."</p> <p>How can God call us righteous when we are sinners? He calls us righteous because of Christ. On the day of our baptism, when he washed away all our sins, he called us righteous. It wasn't just one day, either. Every time that we receive Jesus' body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar, the Lord says, "You are righteous. This was the blood that was shed for you, the body given into death for you." Every time that we reflect on his Word and what Jesus has done, God says to us, "You are righteous." Don't trust your feelings; trust God's declaration of you instead. Praise from God is a glorious reality for those who hold to Christ. God says, "You are righteous through faith in Christ."</p>	<p>Read these first four short gospel statements and then read the final, longer gospel statement below. Which is more direct, specific, and focused? Is it just a case of choosing the right pronoun? All of these statements, too general for other sermons, are in this case textual. Which statements would you change, if any, to preach the gospel instead of preaching about the gospel? How would you change them? Share your thoughts on the Preach the Word discussion board at to www.wels.net/ptw. </p>

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?



Previous issues of Preach the Word have shared a concern about plagiarism with a perspective from the pulpit. Here is our final word on the topic from the perspective of a preacher-turned-publisher, whose view from the pew offers fresh insight

for preachers. Thanks to Rev. John A. Braun, executive editor of Forward in Christ magazine and vice-president of Northwestern Publishing House, who authored this article.

"What does this mean?" A good Lutheran question, you might agree. The human brain, according to recent research, is wired to ask the question and find an answer to everything we encounter. As the brain sifts through information it chooses to react to threats quickly, dismiss information as irrelevant, retain information for future use, or look for something additional that will help us make sense of what our senses perceive.

So as we read God's revelation God's people are always asking "What does this mean?" As a pastor and preacher, they expect some direction from you. The natural human heart can't make sense of God, Christ, grace, faith, or any other truth of Scripture without the Holy Spirit. That's a given God reminds us of in his Word (1 Corinthians 1:18 ff). The Spirit comes through the gospel – his means into our clouded human hearts.

One of our greatest advantages as God's people ask what the Scriptures mean is that the Spirit has worked faith in our hearts. We are fellow pilgrims along life's way to heaven sustained by the same gospel. God's people are interested in what comes from our hearts and minds which have been touched by the Spirit's power.

As we study and prepare for each week's sermon, we are looking for what to say and how to say it. But as we wrestle with the question "What does this text mean?" I think God's people want to hear the

answer the Spirit gave to us—in our sincere voice and our own personal style—one heart to another. Yes, one frail human traveler to another.

Our study of a text may have uncovered someone else's insightful treatment or some remarkable eloquent way of proclaiming it. Our schedules may have limited the time we have to prepare our own treatment and insight. Yet much can be said about the sincere and genuine voice of a believing preacher who prepares his own message.

I was to write about copyright issues. Yes, the law protects the intellectual property of others—including sermons, commentaries, and helps. Besides the issue of the law, one might ask if Lutheran concepts dominate prepared material or if they come from other perspectives that minimize Christ crucified. But finally, a suggestion: make the material you use your own so that God's people hear the voice of their pastor not the voice of another.

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 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!

WALTHER: HOW TO PREACH LAW AND GOSPEL

On November 28, 1884 students gathered for the tenth evening lecture by C.F.W. Walther. He offered them Thesis VI: "The Word of God is not rightly divided when the Law is not preached in its full sternness and the Gospel not in its full sweetness, when, on the contrary, Gospel elements are mingled with the Law and Law elements with the Gospel." Here is some of what he said ...

"The Law has nothing to say about grace" (p. 79).

"When preaching the Law, you must ever bear in mind that the Law makes no concessions ... If you would direct men to do good works and for their comfort add a remark like this: 'You should, indeed, be perfect; however, God does not demand the impossible from us. Do what you can in your weakness; only be sincere in your intention!' – I say, if you would speak thus, you would be preaching a damnable doctrine; for this is a shameful corruption of the Law. God never spoke like that from Sinai" (p. 80).

"There is to be no ranting about abominable vices that may be rampant ... The Law makes no one godly; but when it begins to produce its proper effects, the person who is feeling its power begins to fume and rage against God. He hates the preacher who has shouted the Law into his heart, and he feels that he cannot slip its coils" (pp. 81,82).

"The conversion of Pharisees is a far more difficult task than that of a person who acknowledges his sin ... The Jews had mingled Gospel elements with the Law by telling people: 'If you do not actually slay somebody, you are not a murderer'" (p. 83).

"Of men who are serving in the sacred office of the ministry ... God requires not only that we love His Word, but also that we tremble at it, that is, that we sincerely dread to deviate from a single letter of the divine Word, that we do not dare to add anything to it or take anything from it. We are to be ready to shed our blood rather than yield a tittle of God's Word" (p. 88).

(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. For the full version of these sermon helps visit www.wels.net/ptw.

Saints Triumphant

Some of the misconceptions people have include this thought: "Will everyone on Judgment Day find out what a weasel I was? I'm going to be so ashamed." God is giving us some happy news. "*The former things will not be remembered.*" This is God's way of saying we're not going to have our nose rubbed in our failures.

Advent 1

Repent of falling asleep in a night of spiritual inactivity and live as a child of the day alertly watching and actively waiting.

Christmas Eve

Jesus was born to all people and for all people. Therefore, Christmas doesn't passively hide its face and skirt by the spiritual beggar inwardly pleading for God's favor. Christmas doesn't rudely stick its nose in the air and ask those who have drifted away from the church to make it up before even thinking about returning. Christmas doesn't secretively hide its treasures from those who haven't been good enough in the past year. Christmas is everywhere. Christmas is for everyone. By God's design! ***You Can't Miss Christmas!***

We all know that Jesus was given from heaven but the Bible says he is a gift to you. He who possesses all things belongs to you.

Christmas 1

The baby Jesus is not some celestial, mythical god up in the clouds in his own little world above the law. He was born to be our helpful Brother!



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2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398 414/256-3265

Pastor Daron Lindemann, editor dlindemann@gracedowntown.org
Bryan Gerlach, managing editor Bryan.Gerlach@sab.wels.net
Back issues are at www.wels.net/ptw