

Quotes from Luther on the Law / Gospel Distinction

Therefore whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian. I admit that in the time of temptation I myself do not know how to do this as I should. The way to distinguish the one from the other is to locate the Gospel in heaven and the Law on earth, to call the righteousness of the Gospel heavenly and divine and the righteousness of the Law earthly and human, and to distinguish as sharply between the righteousness of the Gospel and that of the Law as God distinguishes between heaven and earth or between light and darkness or between day and night. Let the one be like the light and the day, and the other like the darkness and the night. If we could only put an even greater distance between them! Therefore if the issue is faith, heavenly righteousness, or conscience, let us leave the Law out of consideration altogether and let it remain on the earth. But if the issue is works, then let us light the lamp of works and of the righteousness of the Law in the night. So let the sun and the immense light of the Gospel and of grace shine in the day, and let the lamp of the Law shine in the night. These two must be distinguished in your mind in such a way that when your conscience is completely terrified by a sense of sin, you will think of yourself. "At the moment you are busy on earth. Here let the ass work, let him serve and carry the burden that has been laid upon him; that is, let the body and its members be subject to the Law. But when you ascend into heaven, leave the ass with his burdens on earth; for the conscience has no relation to the Law or to works or to earthly righteousness. Thus the ass remains in the valley; but the conscience ascends the mountain with Isaac, knowing absolutely nothing about the Law or its works but looking only to the forgiveness of sins and the pure righteousness offered and given in Christ."¹

In the course of His sermon Christ promised the Holy Spirit, which implies that the Holy Spirit was not yet present. This does not mean, of course, that He was not in heaven according to His nature. No, it means that He had not revealed Himself and His work. For it is the Spirit's peculiar function and office to reveal and glorify Christ, to preach Him, and to testify of Him. This office was not yet in force. The office of glorifying Christ was not yet being administered, that is, the proclamation of forgiveness of sin, of redemption from death, of comfort, and of joy in Christ. It was still not known that salvation, righteousness, joy, and life were to be given to us through this Man Christ. To be sure, Christ promises this here. He also reveals that it is He in whom one must believe, and that the believer will have what He promises. One must not fall prey to the foolish notion that the Holy Spirit was not created until Christ had risen from the dead. No, this text states that the Spirit had not yet been given; that is, He was not yet fulfilling His office. The old message and the Law were still in effect. For this reason we often say and constantly teach that one must distinguish between the Law and the Gospel.

The preaching of the Law produces sin. It is a message that provokes thirst and distress. It creates hungry souls, terrified, sorrowful, and anxious hearts and consciences, which sigh for God's grace. This preaching remains in force until Christ rises from the dead and is glorified. Nothing but thirst, need, and want prevail here; yes, there is neither remedy nor help. For there man is told: "This is what you did, and this is what you neglected. You are subject to death and

¹ Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 26, pp. 115–116). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

to the wrath of God.” We who were tormented by this thought have experienced the truth of this. Man in general is not much concerned about spiritual thirst and shows little interest in the question whether or not the Gospel is preached.

That was the situation in Christ’s day. This was the tenor of the sermons at their best: “If you want to be pious and to be saved, keep the Law.” But how one might be able to keep the Law, or how they could be saved who had not observed its precepts and could boast of no good works—that no one knew. For the Holy Spirit had not yet been given, and Christ was not yet glorified.²

Therefore the whole emphasis is on the clause “you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews”; that is: “You compel them to fall from grace and faith to the Law and works, and to deny Christ, as though He had suffered and died in vain.” This word, “you compel,” summarizes all the perils and sins that Paul stresses and discusses throughout this epistle. For if that compulsion or necessity is granted, then faith must be abolished; and where this is abolished and overthrown, there all the promises of God are invalidated, all the gifts of the Holy Spirit are trampled underfoot, and everyone simply has to perish and be damned. Throughout this epistle Paul attributes many such qualities to the righteousness of the Law.

Now if it is so dangerous to deal with the Law, and if this fall was so easy and so great, as though it had been all the way from heaven to hell, let every Christian learn diligently to distinguish between the Law and the Gospel. Let him permit the Law to rule his body and its members but not his conscience. For that queen and bride must not be polluted by the Law but must be kept pure for Christ, her one and only husband; as Paul says elsewhere (2 Cor. 11:2): “I betrothed you to one husband.” Therefore let the conscience have its bridal chamber, not deep in the valley but high on the mountain. Here let only Christ lie and reign, Christ, who does not terrify sinners and afflict them, but who comforts them, forgives their sins, and saves them. Therefore let the afflicted conscience think nothing, know nothing, and pit nothing against the wrath and judgment of God except the Word of Christ, which is a Word of grace, forgiveness of sins, salvation, and life everlasting. But it is really hard to do this. For human nature and reason does not hold Christ firmly in its embrace but is quickly drawn down into thoughts about the Law and sin. Thus it always tries to be free according to the flesh but a slave and a captive according to the conscience.³

The Question is asked, “How can justification take place without the works of the law, and how *by the works of the law* can there be no justification, since Jas. 2:26 clearly states: ‘Faith apart from works is dead’ and ‘a person is justified by works,’ using the example of Abraham and

² Luther, M. (1999). [Luther’s works, vol. 23: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 6-8](#). (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 23, pp. 277–278). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

³ Luther, M. (1999). [Luther’s works, vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4](#). (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 26, pp. 119–120). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

Rahab (Jas. 2:23–25)?” And Paul himself in Gal. 5:6 speaks of “faith working through love,” and above in chapter 2:13 he says that “the doers of the law will be justified before God.” The answer to this question is that the apostle is distinguishing between the law and faith, or between the letter and grace, and thus also between their respective works. The *works of the law* are those, he says, which take place outside of faith and grace and are done at the urging of the law, which either forces obedience through fear or allures us through the promise of temporal blessings. But the *works of faith*, he says, are those which are done out of the spirit of liberty and solely for the love of God. And the latter cannot be accomplished except by those who have been justified by faith, to which justification the works of the law add nothing, indeed, they strongly hinder it, since they do not permit a person to see oneself as unrighteous and in need of justification.⁴

⁴ Luther, M. (2017). [*The Interpretation of Scripture*](#). (E. K. Cameron, H. J. Hillerbrand, K. I. Stjerna, & T. J. Wengert, Eds.) (Vol. 6, p. 485). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.