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THE LAW AND GOSPEL OF LOVE

John 15:9-17; Easter 6B-Jr. Confirmation; May 4-5, 2024

Jesus said: **“As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.”**

[GREETING]

Hearing again the beginning words of today’s Gospel Reading, we can’t help but be struck by the many times Jesus speaks of love: His Father’s love for Him; Jesus’ love for us; our love for one another; and abiding in His love for us. Another often-spoken word is “commandment.” Jesus says we should keep His commandments even as He has kept His Father’s commandments. Jesus’ commandment is that we love one another, love defined as laying down your life for your friends. This raises the question of the relationship between love and commandment. God the Father commands His Son to love us the way He loves Him; we are commanded to love one another the way God loves us. Is Jesus speaking words of law or gospel to us here. Is love something of the law or of the gospel, or both?

Today is Confirmation Day for five of our young catechumens, who have been examined concerning God’s law and gospel, their ability to distinguish between law and gospel, and how God uses each to accomplish His purposes. They were required to memorize Bible verses that summarize what God’s law and gospel are. For the law they can recite from Matthew 22: **Jesus said... “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself”** (Mt 22:37-39; Dt 6:5; Lv 19:18). John 3:16 is the gospel verse: **“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”**

Did you notice that these law and gospel Bible verses both refer to “love”? Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy and Leviticus in the Old Testament to summarize the Ten Commandments. God’s law to us, can be “boiled down” to “**love God**” and “**love your neighbor.**” The John 3:16 gospel verse states that **God loved us in this way: He gave His Son to die on the cross and rise from the dead to save the world.** In God’s Word, love is both a law and gospel thing, yet this is not a confusing or mixing of law or gospel. Love is a description of both law and gospel.

1. The Law of Love

Jesus says, “**Abide in My love,**” “**Keep My commandments,**” and, “**This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.**” Jesus is speaking law to us. These words are not suggestions, things that are optional for Christians. The promise of eternal life is lost without faith in Jesus as our Savior. To “**abide in [Jesus’] love**” basically means to keep living in Him by faith. To break this commandment is choosing to “fear, love, and trust” in something or someone more than in God.

When we do not abide in God’s love, do not keep His commandments, and do not love one another as God in Christ has loved us, God threatens us with eternal punishment as sinful unbelievers. The word the *Explanation to Luther’s Small Catechism* uses to describe how God’s law is working in this way is “curb.” If you choose a god other than the one, true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you will face God the judge in the end and be condemned to hell forever. You don’t want that for yourself, and neither does God. God’s law says to us, “Don’t do that because it can only hurt you!”

When we do not abide in God’s love, do not keep His commandments, and do not love one another as God in Christ has loved us, God’s law points that out to us and accuses us as sinners. The catechism uses the word “mirror” to describe this function of the law. When we “look at ourselves in the mirror” of God’s law, we see ourselves for who and what we are: sinners who have broken God’s law. We have not always perfectly abided in His love. We have not kept His commandments, especially to love one another as He has loved us. God’s law condemns us to hell because we are guilty.

God's law also instructs us to abide in His love, keep His commandments, and love one another as God in Christ has loved us. God's law shows us what is good and what He wants us to do. This is God's law functioning as a guide or ruler. Christians, people like us who believe God has saved us from death and hell by forgiving our sins for Jesus' sake, realize that God's law is good, and we want to keep and obey it. We believe that abiding in His love means trusting we are saved. We want to keep God's commandments, especially to love one another as He has loved us. Wanting to love God and each other is good and pleasing to God who promises to bless us for keeping His commandments. It also gives great blessings to others who receive that love from us.

The one thing that our desire and best efforts to keep God law cannot do is save us from condemnation. The law of love is still God's law, and no sinner is saved by keeping God's law, no matter how hard we try or want to keep it. Sinners never rise to the level of absolute perfection in what we do or in our motivations for doing it. As long as we live in this world Christians are a mix of sinner and saint. Whenever law and gospel are mixed or confused, no gospel remains, only condemnation. When faced with God's commands to love Him and our neighbor, the law of love remains law and can only condemn us to hell finally. We need the gospel, God's good news to us in Jesus.

2. The Gospel of Love

Jesus says, **“As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you... I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love... Greater love has no one than this, that Someone lays down His life for His friends.”** Jesus is speaking gospel to us. The law is what we must do for God and for our neighbor; the gospel is what God does for us and for our salvation in Jesus Christ. What we cannot do to save ourselves – keep perfectly the law required of us – Jesus does perfectly keep for us. That's gospel. The punishment we deserve for breaking God's law was put on Jesus, who suffered and died on the cross with our sin. He was found guilty so we are found innocent and forgiven for His sake. That's gospel. The word that describes what God does to save us and why He does this for us is “love.” **“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”**

The word that Jesus uses for “love” is much deeper than how we often use it.

In our western culture, “love” is thought of as a feeling inside of us; we have love in our hearts for someone or something. I love my wife and children and family. I love pizza – something I haven’t had for a long time, which is my choice. I love spring weather when the sun shines and it is not too hot, the trees bud out and flowers bloom. We often use “love” as a thought or feeling.

The way Jesus uses “love” is more than as just a thought or feeling. It is an action. Love is what God does for us in Jesus Christ. The Father loves His Son by sending Him to be our Savior. Jesus loves us by keeping His Father’s commandments and laying down His life on the cross for us. Love is Jesus giving us His body and blood to eat and drink in the Lord’s Supper for the forgiveness of our sins. God loves us by not counting our sins against us but counting them against His Son. Jesus loves us by choosing sinners like us to be His friends, knowing how much it would cost Him to do that. God loves us by delivering us from the realm of death and the devil and making us His own children by the water and Word of Baptism. This is the gospel of love, and it is all about God doing everything needed for us to be forgiven and saved.

When Jesus says to us, “**Abide in My love,**” that is the kind of love that He means for us to abide in. While it is true that Jesus commands us to do this as God’s children, which makes this a law statement, only a fool would consider rejecting this love as worthless. Refusing to abide in this love will bring God’s condemnation. The Rite of Confirmation notes that we “confess [Jesus] before men” which is essentially the same as “abiding in His love.” This is why the promises of Confirmation are given joyfully. They are based on God’s grace and love in Jesus Christ.

Jesus says to us, “**As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you**” – the gospel of love. “**Abide in My love**” – the law of love. We are to love God and our neighbor. What sort of love is this? “**For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.**” “**Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.**” In the name of Jesus. Amen.