

“Scripture Alone: The Law”

In a sermon, Martin Luther once compared the law to visiting the doctor. The doctor, he said, must make a diagnosis before telling him what medicine to take. Thus it is likewise here. The law discovers the disease. After the diagnosis has been made, we have the medicine— and it’s the healing power of the gospel.

As we kick off our Reformation 500 sermon series today, we are focusing on Scripture alone and more specifically Scripture alone and God’s law. I can already see the excitement in your faces! I mean who doesn’t like a good sermon on what I’m reminded of a men’s event we hosted here at Hope a few years ago. Before everyone left, we asked for feedback regarding the material presented and ways we as Pastors could help them moving forward. I distinctly remember one man’s response that what he really wanted from us was more preaching of the law. I hope that man is here today.

In all seriousness, God’s law makes demands of things we are to do; it insists on things we are to perform in the service of God and to our neighbors. In a nutshell, God’s law says, this you are to do. Take the 10 commandments for example and it makes perfect sense. Do not lie—this you are to do, says the Lord. Do not steal, commit adultery, or covet—this you are to do, says the Lord. So for the anonymous man who responded that he wanted more preaching of the law, I can only imagine what it is he needed God to remind him of what he was to do. But he obviously needed God’s word of law, because he knew it is the power of God to convict sinners of their guilt. And maybe the same is true for some of you today.

But how does God’s word really convict? I mean it seemed to be that way for young Martin Luther the monk as we saw in the clip. What he heard in the Scriptures were warnings after warnings of a God who was not happy— a God who was just waiting to throw all his sins right back in his face. Romans 3:19 says, *“God will hold the whole world accountable to him.”* Maybe it was this realization of facing God’s judgment and being held accountable that nearly drove Luther to abandon all hope as a monk. He was constantly confessing every sin that he could think of because he was fearful of the consequences. And while I am not suggesting we need to live in constant fear of God

like that because we don't— through faith we are connected to the death and resurrection of Christ. But there are times when the word of God can penetrate our hearts to the point that we are on our knees making the self confession, "I am not as God would have me to be. In order to live, I have to become a different person." That's when God's words of law actually convicts and for people on their way to walking away from God permanently, it's the only thing that can bring them back.

Don't think so? A young professional was leading a double life. He was a great father, a good provider, and very involved in his church. People respected him and admired him. On the outside, it appeared like this guy had it all together. But the truth was he didn't. He was having an affair. As the weeks turned into months, he lost track of the lies he had told his wife. He lost track of how much money he spent—money that should have been used to support his own family. And then one day it all came crashing down. Not because his girlfriend left him or his wife found out. But because God's word of law penetrated his heart. *"By the law is the knowledge of sin,"* he read from Romans 3:20. The verse appeared on his phone as part of a daily email that he normally would have just deleted. But not this time. He read it over and over again. By the law is the knowledge of sin. And he started crying tears of anger and tears of sadness. What have I done? What have I become? I am not as God would have me be, he confessed. I am a liar. I am a thief. I am an adulterer. It wasn't pleasant. In fact it was raw and it was ugly, but it was real. The power of God's word spoke and this man became a different person.

Of course, it's not always that dramatic, but this story should make us think about just how important God's word of law is in our lives. I mean how many times did this man get a bible verse on his phone that only told him the good news of what God was doing for him in Christ? I'm sure there were many, but none of them made him question the affair like that one verse of law. And while this man's situation is unique to him, how many of us hear the freedom of the gospel and are still comfortable in our sins?

I remember a woman who was in a similar situation as the man I just described but this time instead of a response of repentance, it was a response of "Jesus died for my sins so I am forgiven." She wasn't convicted at all. She was just ignoring the commands and demands of the law in favor of the words of consolation. But her desire was still to keep on doing what she was doing, which meant she was really comfortable in her sinfulness. In fact, when she compared herself to the really bad people in the world, she insisted she was still a pretty good person. And this is where it gets really serious because anytime anyone sees themselves above what God demands, that person is basically saying they have no need for the forgiveness and salvation only Christ can offer.

And this is not just about 6th Commandment issues—they are always easy to point to in sermons on the law I admit—it's about any known sin that is causing us not to trust God and know him as he is. And how do we know what sins may be causing us to do just that? *"By the law is the knowledge of sins" (Rom. 3:20)*. Only through God's law do we possess that knowledge. And this is so important. In fact it's so important that we should look in the mirror each day and examine our lives with this knowledge. Talk to God about your sins. Let him speak to you as you read the 10 commandments and reflect on how you have fallen short on his expectations and demands. Confess your sins and ask for his forgiveness before they harden your hearts. He wants to hear from you. Because the truth we all need to hear the law to prepare us for the good news of the gospel. The words of Ezekiel in our OT reading couldn't be more true— *"repent and live declares the Lord"* (Ezk.19:32).

Great way to start our Reformation celebration? I think it is because understanding God's relationship with us is about listening to what he is telling us through Scripture alone. The law discovers the disease and the gospel is the medicine. Thanks be to God.
Amen.