

I created this balance contraption in order to get at what is going on in the second reading for today from Hebrews. In Lutheran theology we often talk about a balance, or a tension, between Law and Gospel. You may remember me saying before that Law does not mean the Old Testament religious laws. And Gospel does not mean Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Law is anything that drives you to God. It is anything that reminds you of your need for God and God's grace. The Law is anything that convicts you, makes you feel guilty about what you've done. It is anything that makes you feel ashamed of yourself. It reminds you that things aren't right and that you need God.

By contrast the Gospel is anything that gives you the message that you have God's grace. Remember, grace means unmerited favor. And so, despite the Law saying you are broken and you shouldn't have God's favor, the Gospel says you have it anyway. God loves you. You don't deserve it. You haven't earned it, but you have it. And you can live in confidence in that.

Lutheran theology says that you have to keep Law and Gospel in tension, or in some sort of balance. Too much one way or the other and you end up with a mess. Let's call one side of this scale Law and the other side Gospel. I have bags of sugar here. If I put one on each side of the scale it all stays balanced. But if I have just Law and take away Gospel the whole thing goes crooked. Without Gospel all you have here is how bad you are, how you are a failure. How you are hopeless and worthless. Without Gospel the Law runs rampant in your head driving you into desperation and depression. Eventually you end up hating God for being so cruel and mean. Why is there so much suffering? Why isn't life fair? Why do I have to work and struggle and sacrifice and feel pain?

On the other side, if I take away Law and leave only Gospel I end up in a similar mess. Grace ceases to be grace. If there is no Law then you start to think, "I am a really good person. Of course everyone loves me. God certainly thinks I'm great. I deserve God's love and everything that goes with it." Without Law grace loses its power. You become very narcissistic. You exploit forgiveness. You think you simply deserve it.

If our culture leans any way these days it is on the side of Gospel. We don't want to hear about things being bad or about our contribution to problems. Many Christians like to think of God as sweet, cuddly, and perhaps cute. While there seems to be a social assumptions and understanding of the church as being very conservative and law oriented, most churches are not. Many churches essentially teach universalism these days. God's love is ultimate. God loves everyone. Therefore everyone will be saved, period.

As a pastor I will say there is a lot of pressure to teach such a message. It is a way to appear acceptable and relevant. The Law doesn't preach well in society today. A negative label is quickly slapped on you. This is no surprise. I sometimes think the fervor in the whole faith vs. science debate that happens often is ultimately a way to get rid of the Law side of things.

If you apply the scientific principles of critically objective observation you will not find evidence that God exists. If there is no objectively verifiable proof of God then it is but a small step to say there is no God. And if there is

no God; well, then the position of God is open. You might as well be God. And if you are God then there is no Law. And if there is no Law then there is no ultimately accountability.

In this cultural background Law messages sound antiquated and naïve. Gospel leaning sermons are far more acceptable than Law ones. Gospel sermons neither challenge nor offend our cultural background.

The second reading from Hebrews is very much Law oriented. And, as proof of how Gospel oriented our culture and our lives are, it probably sounded bizarre when it was read. I won't ask you to raise your hands if you understood it, but I doubt it made a lot of sense.

I'm not going to explain it verse by verse. If you want that I can point you to any number of commentaries you can read. Let's just look at the overall themes.

One, you are *not* God. God is not to be mocked. God's power is ultimate and God's Word is final. Don't be cocky when you're around that kind of power.

The worship of God is not something you do when it is convenient for you. It isn't on a list of good things you should do when you get around to is. It is essential. Now when I say worship, I don't mean attending church services. They can be a part of worship. This worship I'm talking about is an attitude of reverence and awe toward God. It is making choices and decisions in your life knowing that God is ultimate and God is your judge.

It is very easy to have faith become something of convenience. It is very easy to think forgiveness is something you can tap into an infinite supply of just for asking. It is easy to put off things in your faith development saying you'll get to them later when you have more time and when life isn't so complicated. This passage from Hebrews reminds us that is not the case. It speaks the Law to us when it holds up a mirror to us showing that other things have come in the way of our relationship with God.

The passage from Hebrews also gives us a reminder that we see many places in the Bible. This world we live in - and everything that we can see and touch and feel and verify as being absolute - is not as absolute as we might think. Don't put your eternal security in it. And don't fall victim to the traps which encourage us to seek safety in insurances, armies, bank accounts, possessions, and even social networks. They aren't that secure. Ultimately they won't save you.

Why should we worship? Why should we give God undivided loyalty and attention? Why should we trust God and not other things? Hebrews answers all those why questions.

Why? Because despite God's awesome power and majesty he truly does love you. Because God loves you enough that he didn't give you 1% of his attention. God loves you enough that he didn't give you a tithe, or 10%, of his attention. God loves you enough that he gave you 100% attention. He gave everything for you, once for all. Once and done.

I know it is hard in our intellectual minds to make any direct connections between Jesus' crucifixion almost 2000 years ago and our lives today. It just seems like an historical story. But it is a look at the ultimate reality of salvation. It is the act which saves you. And it is something we simply have to take on faith.

Ultimately in our Law/Gospel balance the Gospel has the final word. As Hebrews says God will ultimately take away the need for the Law. But for now we still need it. In a way, harsh as it may sound, it is also God's love for us. It is what drives us to be able to receive God's ultimate goodness. Amen