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HOW TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL

Discerning law from gospel is a critical skill for Christians and the hallmark of Lutheranism. Law and gospel are always connected to God’s word. God brings them to you in the Bible, in preaching, in the sacraments, and in all kinds of daily activity. If you listen closely, you’ll hear God speaking both law and gospel.

The Law

Martin Luther suggested that the law has two uses: First, to point out and condemn sin. Second, to drive the sinner toward the grace and mercy revealed in Jesus Christ and his cross.

1 Listen for the “should.”
   God uses the law to tell us what we ought to do so we maintain an orderly, peaceful, and secure world. It therefore always sounds like a demand. Words such as should, ought to, must, have to, and shall are a dead giveaway that the law is around somewhere.

2 Listen for the First Commandment.
   “You shall have no other gods,” is what all other law rises from. The law’s goal is to force sinners to act as though God’s will is more important than our own.

3 Discern who’s in charge.
   Demands always require you to do something to fulfill them. If you’re being urged to act a certain way to make something happen, it’s the law talking.

4 Be alert to death lurking in the shadows.
   When you feel like the demands of life are just about killing you, you can be pretty sure it’s God’s law nipping at your heels.

The Gospel

1 Listen for the promise.
   If what you’re hearing tells you what Christ promises you—without any action on your part—then the gospel is present.

2 Expect a radical surprise from Jesus.
   We sinners should never expect the good news; we should only expect God’s judgment. Instead, the gospel brings sinners mercy and life from Jesus.
THE FIVE GROSSEST BIBLE STORIES

1. **Eglon and Ehud (Judges 3:12-30).**
   Before kings reigned over Israel, judges ruled the people. At that time, a very overweight king named Eglon conquered Israel and demanded money. A man named Ehud brought the payment to Eglon while he was perched on his “throne” (meaning “toilet”). Along with the money, Ehud handed over a little something extra—his sword, which he buried so far in Eglon’s belly that the sword disappeared into the king’s fat and, as the Bible says, “the dirt came out” (v. 22).

2. **Job’s sores (Job 2:1-10).**
   Job lived a righteous life yet he suffered anyway. He had oozing sores from the bald spot on top of his head clear down to the soft spot on the bottom of his foot. Job used a broken piece of pottery to scrape away the pus that leaked from his sores.

3. **The naked prophet (Isaiah 20).**
   God’s prophets went to great lengths to get God’s message across to the people. Isaiah was no exception. God’s people planned a war, but God gave it the thumbs down. Isaiah marched around Jerusalem naked for three years as a sign of what would happen if the people went to war.

4. **The almost-naked prophet (Jeremiah 13:1-11).**
   God sent Jeremiah to announce that God could no longer be proud of the people. To make the point, Jeremiah bought a new pair of underclothes, wore them every day without washing them, then buried them in the wet river sand. Later, he dug them up, strapped them on and shouted that this is what has happened to the people who were God’s pride!

5. **Spilling your guts (Matthew 27:1-8; Acts 1:16-19).**
   Judas betrayed Jesus and sold him out for 30 pieces of silver. He bought a field with the ill-gotten loot. Guilt-stricken, Judas walked out to the field, his belly swelled up until it burst, and his intestines spilled out on to the ground.