

Putting the Law into Proper Perspective: A Sermon Study on Romans 3:31

By Gerald O. Hoenecke

[This is the fifth in a series of sermon studies on the 12 articles of the Formula of Concord. The Synod's Formula of Concord Anniversary Committee proposed the series to the homiletics department of the Seminary as a part of its planned observance of the anniversaries of the Formula of Concord and of the Book of Concord.]

“If one understands the art of rightly dividing law from gospel, give him the chief place and make him a doctor of Sacred Scripture.” So said Luther in his 1532 “Sermon on the Distinction between Law and Gospel.” Luther knew what he was talking about. Like the Apostle Paul he had grown up in an atmosphere of legalism. He had been taught to look to himself and his works to gain favor and grace with God. Thus he had also come to understand the expression *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ*, the righteousness of God, wherever it occurred, as “a virtue by which He is Himself righteous and condemns sinners. They (his teachers) had said: ‘The righteousness of God, that is, the wrath of God.’” (In comments on Ge 27:38; E.M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, vol. 2, p 835, 2600). No wonder he complained in a sermon on Matthew 18:11 in 1537: “The wretched Pope so completely tore and removed our dear Savior Jesus Christ from our eyes and covered His friendly and lovely color with a hue so abominably black that we feared Him more than we feared the wretched devil” (*Ibid.*, p 835, 2599). Surely we can understand why at that time Luther felt as he expressed it in 1519, when after lecturing on Romans, he again took up the interpretation of the Psalms: “I did not love, nay, rather I hated this righteous God, who punishes sinners, and if not with tacit blasphemy, certainly with huge murmurings I was angry with God, saying: ‘As though it really were not enough that miserable sinners should be eternally damned with original sin and have all kinds of calamities laid upon them by the law of the Ten Commandments, God must go and add sorrow upon sorrow and even through the gospel itself bring his justice and wrath to bear!’” (Wilh. Pauck, *Luther: Lectures on Romans* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961], Introduction, p XXXVII). This training had so warped Luther's understanding of Romans that he at one time believed the first four chapters were not beneficial to teach, but only those that follow, because they incited one to lead a virtuous life. We know of course that by the mercy of God he became enlightened, so that later he could say he learned from the first chapters the righteousness of God which makes Christians of us and from the last chapters the marks of Christianity, that which adorns it.

Obviously, what was at the bottom of the problem that at one time so deeply troubled Luther was a horrible confusion of law and gospel. More exactly stated, it was a devilish corruption of the gospel, an updating of the Judaistic error of Paul's day. What was passed off as gospel was not only a different gospel, but as Paul immediately added in his message to the Galatians, “not another,” in other words, no gospel, no good news at all (Ga 1:7).

By the grace of God Luther had learned to recognize and subsequently exposed this teaching as a soul-destroying error. Yet, as much and as strongly as he condemned turning the gospel into another law and teaching justification by the law or the works of the law, so strongly did he insist on the proper place of the law in the Christian's life of sanctification. Commenting on Romans 7:1–6, he said: “We are under the law and yet not under the law, i.e., though we live under the law, we nevertheless are not in subjection under the law, but remain free and unmoved by it. This occurs when I in faith live under the law and perform the works of the law voluntarily and with delight, not by coercion of the commandment or with the thought of being saved by works” (Chr. Eberle, *Luthers Episteln Auslegung* [Stuttgart: Verlag der ev. Buecherstiftung, 1886], p 111).

It is certainly not in the least surprising that also the Formula of Concord devotes two articles (V and VI) to the role of the law in the life of the Christian, specifically its third use, for antinomianism is an almost to be expected reaction to the doctrine of justification by faith without and apart from the law. This, the devil's brew, had entered the ranks of Luther's followers and successors and made it necessary for the gnesio-Lutherans, out

of love for the truth and endangered souls, to speak out in rejection of this error. Actually antinomianism took on two forms. John Agricola held that the law had no place whatever in the church and insisted that even the knowledge of sin and contrition over sin are brought about by the gospel. In the Second Antinomian Controversy the third use of the law was the main issue. The contention of some was that the law was of no service whatever to the Christian with respect to good works. “For the one side taught and maintained that the regenerate do not learn the new obedience, or in what good works they ought to walk, from the Law, and that this teaching (concerning good works) is not to be urged thence (from the Law), because they have been made free by the Son of God, have become the temples of His Spirit, and therefore do freely of themselves what God requires of them, by the prompting of the Holy Ghost, just as the sun of itself, without any (foreign) impulse, completes its ordinary course” (FC, Thor. Decl. VI, *Trig.*, p 963,2).

If this made it necessary for the post-Luther church to speak out, there is no less need for clarity in this matter today. And while we shall make reference to the statements on this doctrine in the Confessions, we shall also here let the Scriptures themselves speak, centering our attention on Paul’s words in Romans 3:31: “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid; yea, we establish the law.”

In using this text for the purpose intended, we are fully aware that not all commentators would go along with this. The Meyer Romans commentary (Heinrich A.W. Meyer, *Crit. & Exeg.; Hand-book to the Epistle to the Romans* [New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884], p 150) in a special note on our verse states: “The view of Schedd, Hodge, Philippi, Morison, and others, that the question has reference to a nullification of the law in its moral obligation, so that the Apostle’s reply defends the faith-system from the charge of having an antinomian tendency, is accordingly excluded.” This view is obviously based on an understanding of the word νόμος in this verse which in our opinion is wrong. For Meyer this has reference to the Old Testament Scriptures and serves as transition to chapter four, in which Paul “discusses the case of Abraham; that is, it presents the proof of justification by faith, which is derived from the fact that this was the system involved in the covenant with the father of the Jewish people.” While we fully agree with this statement as to the purpose of chapter four, Meyer’s reasons for finding reference to this in the word νόμος in our text are far from convincing. In fact, the use of νόμος in the preceding context gives every reason for rejecting this view. Paul had said in verse 28 that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law (νόμος), and in verses 29 and 30, that this applies to the Gentile as well as to the Jew. Good exegesis would seem to demand taking νόμος in our verse (31) in the same sense as in verse 28, the moral law with its commands and prohibitions. This is obviously also the opinion of the Apology: “And in Romans 3:31, Paul says: *Do we, then, make void the Law through faith? God forbid! Yea, we establish the Law.* And Christ says, Matthew 19:17: *If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments....* These and similar sentences testify that the Law ought to be begun in us, and be kept by us more and more (that we are to keep the Law when we have been justified by faith, and thus increase more and more in the Spirit)” (Ap., Art III, *Trig.* p 159,2–3). Also: “Wherefore the Law cannot be truly kept unless the Holy Ghost be received through faith. Accordingly, Paul says that *the Law is established by faith, and not made void*; because the Law can only then be thus kept when the Holy Ghost is given” (Ibid., *Trig.*, p 159,11). And so the question in verse 31 reflects the argument of the legalist, that verse 28 would lead to lawlessness. If I am justified alone by faith in Christ without the deeds of the law, then why pay any attention whatever to the law? In other words, why then not do as I please without regard for the law? Or, to use Paul’s words in chapter 6:15: “Shall we commit sin (transgress the law) because we are not under law but under grace?” Thus the legalist reveals his erroneous view that the law not only sets down the rules for a God-pleasing conduct, but also is able to bring about such a conduct. Lenski states the position of the legalist well in his comments on Romans 7:4: “For the great delusion with reference to the law is that the law produces good works. That is why we have so many legalists, moralists (chapter 2), reformers, and the like. They think it is fatal to relinquish the law, fatal to the production of good works.” He properly adds: “The opposite is true: it is fatal to good works to cling to the law, for the law never produced a single good work. It works wrath (4:15), it increases the Fall (5:20), it works realization of sin (3:20), but never a good work” (R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* [Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1945], p 450).

The antinomian goes wrong in the opposite direction from the legalist. His conclusion on the basis of verse 28 would run like this: We are justified by faith completely without the law; thus the law cannot play a part in our justification. What is more, Paul also teaches that we have died to the law through our connection by faith with Christ and His death, thus are free from the law, no longer under the law. In fact, he wrote to Timothy that “the law is not given for the righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient...” (1 Tm 1:9). Thus the Scriptures teach that the law plays no part whatever in our life as Christians, not even as a guide for Christian living.

Paul’s question in our text takes up this antinomian contention. The οὖν introduces it as a conclusion from the foregoing convincing argument that God is one and as such has not even two, but only one way of justifying the sinner, whether Jew or Gentile, that is, without the law, alone by faith in Christ. Καταργοῦμεν is present indicative active of καταργέω, which means “to render idle, inactive, inoperative; also, to put an end to, abolish, invalidate.” The question is: Do we by insisting with the Scriptures everywhere that the law plays no part in our justification ignore or despise the law? Are we thereby teaching that the commandments and prohibitions, the demands of the law are not to be taken seriously by us Christians, that God does not mean what He says in the law? Put another way, do we thus actually encourage lawlessness and cause people to live as they please, as though they were not accountable to God for their conduct? At least, are we not giving them the impression that this is the case? (The phrase διὰ πίστεως, lit. “by or through faith,” quite likely means more than merely, “by believing.” In the context it suggests the idea “by teaching, yes, insisting on it, that justification is by faith alone, without the deeds of the law.”)

Before Paul gives his positive answer to this question, he employs his frequently used strong negation μὴ γένοιτο, lit. “may it not be,” which the Authorized Version always translates with an idiomatic “God forbid,” for which other translations have come up with equally suitable renditions, as Lenski’s “Perish the thought!” What this response does is actually to brand the conclusion as satanic blasphemy. For it is no less than God Himself who is being charged with invalidating or disregarding His own law.

Paul not only in the strongest possible manner rejects this blasphemous conclusion, but in a few, telling words presents what is actually the fact. To introduce it, he uses the strong adversative ἀλλά, which is well rendered in English with “on the contrary” or “the fact of the matter is.” That fact is, νόμον ἱστάνομεν, “we establish the law.” Ἰστάνω, a later form of ἵστημι, means “to set or place, propose,” then “establish, confirm.” A good translation would be to “validate or support.” How does insisting on it in our preaching that justification is alone by faith validate the law? In his unpublished lectures on Romans Dr. Adolph Hoenecke gives a comprehensive answer: “1. The gospel presupposes the penitence which the law brings about; 2. The gospel of the death of Christ is the highest acknowledgement of the validity of the law and its curse; 3. The gospel gives new life to the sinner, so that he is able at least to begin to have delight in the law and to do good works according to it (Cf. 6:1; 8:1ff).” In other words, far from making lawless people, the gospel makes them truly law-abiding. When the gospel performs the miracle of a new birth in a person, it changes him from one who hates and opposes the law, one who “is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (8:7), to one who can from the heart say with Paul: “I delight in the law of God after the inward man” (7:22). And so we come up with the following outline for our text.

Putting the Law into Proper Perspective

I. It cannot save us; but, II. It does direct us.

- I. The law cannot save us.
 - A. That it cannot save us, Paul had convincingly shown.
 1. He described in great detail the total depravity of man (1:18–32).
 2. He exposed the even worse state of the selfrighteous moralist (2:1ff).
 3. Thus he proved beyond doubt the inability of man to make himself acceptable to God by means of the law (3:20a).

- B. That it never was God's intention is just as certain.
 1. God indeed said: "The man that doeth them shall live in them" (Ga 3:12).
 2. He also made it unquestionably clear that this would call for perfection (Ga 3:10).
 3. His purpose in this was:
 - a) Not to make man think he could justify and save himself by keeping the law.
 - b) Rather to convince him that he is a sinner and the way of the law is impossible (Ro 3:19f).

- C. This truth is clearly taught in our Lutheran Confessions.
 FC, Ep, Art. II, *Trig.*, p 787, 2.
 S.A., Part III, Art. II, *Trig.*, p 479, 4.

Application: This is a fundamental truth of Scripture which must ever be an essential part of our preaching and teaching.

1. Not only the unbeliever needs to be told this.
2. Also we Christians are not immune to self-righteous thoughts and a better-than-thou attitude.
3. To neglect this teaching would result in throwing the pearls of the gospel before swine (Mt 7:6).

But while the law cannot nor was ever by God intended to save us,

II. It does direct us.

- A. We sorely need this direction.
 1. Not as to the new man in us.
 - a) It is with reference to the new man who "delights in the law of God" (Ro 7:22), that Paul writes: "The law is not made for a righteous man" (1 Tm 1:9).
 - b) This thought is clearly spelled out in the FC, S.D., Art. VI, *Trig.*, p 963, 5–6.
 2. But because of the Old Adam in us.
 - a) He not only constantly opposes our new man, causing us to lament with Paul: Ro 7:19,23.
 - b) He also would have us set up new standards of living not in keeping with but contrary to those set down in God's holy law.
 - c) This, too, is clearly pointed out in the FC, S.D., Art. VI, *Trig.*, p 969, 20.
- B. The law fully suffices to offer the direction we need.
 1. In the law God speaks to us—it is God's holy will.
 2. He Himself has taught us the true, spiritual understanding of His law (Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount).
 3. As Christians we welcome and are grateful for this direction.
- C. But we need ever to remember that the law cannot do more than direct us to a holy, God-pleasing life.
 1. The inability of the law to motivate and enable us to do what it asks is clearly enunciated by Paul in Romans 8:2.
 - a) This is true of our justification.
 - b) This is here said concerning our sanctification.
 2. It is also for this reason that we had to die to the law (Ro 7:5, 6).
 - a) We had to give up completely the idea that we could justify ourselves by keeping the law.
 - b) We likewise had to give up the idea that the law could produce a single good work in us.
- D. The motivation and power to do what God asks in His law comes alone from the gospel.
 1. That is chiefly what Paul has in mind when in our text he says that by our preaching justification by faith alone "we establish the law."

2. This is clearly taught throughout the Bible (Ps 119:32): by Jesus (Jn 15:5).
3. This is a big point in the FC, S.D., Art. VI, *Trig.*, p 965f, 11, 12, 17.

Application:

1. We are living in an age of widespread disregard of laws. Disobedience to the laws of the land is defended even by some clergymen and churches. The result: Crimes are on the increase, also because so frequently criminals are not properly prosecuted and punished, so that there is at times near anarchy.
2. God's law has been replaced by a "new morality," which is nothing else than setting up standards to sinful man's liking, with complete disregard of God's law. Sadly enough, also this is advocated by some churches and their leaders.
3. Because of their old Adam Christians are not infrequently trapped and misled by such enticing new teaching.
4. More than ever we need to hold up God's law, teach it to young and old, in its full spiritual understanding, as the only true guide for Christian, God-pleasing living.
5. Above all, we need ever remember, the motive and strength to do what God asks in His law does not come from the law, but is to be found alone in the Christ of the gospel, as He Himself said: "He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit; for without me ye can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).