

The Teacher Uses Law and Gospel

by Mark Bitter

Dean of Students

Northwestern Preparatory School

Watertown, WI

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First of all I ask the conference to accept the fact that I changed the title of the paper assigned to me. The title suggested was "Balanced Use of Law and Gospel." I was confused by the title and I asked what the conference had in mind. The answer given was that there were questions about when to bring in the gospel while counseling a student, and there were questions about how much outward evidence of sorrow must be shown before absolution can be announced, etc. I feel we'll cover those questions and many more under the present theme of this paper without using the word "balanced" in the title. Permit me to explain why the term "balanced" concerns me. "The letter," the law, "kills." The law says: "Do. Love. Be good. Get right with God." The law kills. The gospel says: "God has done. God has loved. God is gracious. God has set things right." The gospel gives life and the gospel "is the power of salvation" (Romans 1:16). That basic difference between law and gospel is simple, and we all know it.

Problems may arise when we use the "formula" of the law or the "formula" of the gospel to achieve our own purposes, when we say things as, "we need to teach more law" to produce these results or "we need to teach more gospel" to produce these results. We need to teach both, and not necessarily a balanced diet of each as the title "Balanced Use of Law and Gospel" suggests. We dare never conclude that if a person is self-righteous, then two tablespoons of law will achieve the goal of convicting him of sin. And if two tablespoons fails, then double the recipe. We need to remember that the law is always efficacious (Hebrews 4:12), it is always able to convict a person of sin. But the law is not always effective. A stubborn unbelieving heart will defy and hate God's strict demands. In the same way the gospel is always efficacious but it's not always effective. We should definitely announce the good news to penitent people. But we should also never think of the gospel as a medicine that we give out in dosages to produce a desired effect. We must not think that if we apply the gospel to a penitent sinner, then all is now right. The person can reject the good news of Christ and not believe that his sins are forgiven. We need to be careful lest we get the idea that God's Word is some kind of chemical mixture, and that rightly dividing the Word of Truth means properly adjusting the chemical ingredients to get the right proportions so that you achieve the desired effects.

We all know that there is more art than science in applying the law and gospel. Martin Luther said that experience makes you better at it as the Holy Spirit teaches you. God has given us His Word to share. He has revealed two main teachings in that Word - law and gospel. Every teacher here wants to use and apply law and gospel as correctly and effectively as he or she can. But even if we err, even if we fail, God will get all of the glorious work done that He plans to get done. He will bring the good news of Christ to all of His elect. We praise Him that He gives us the joy of being channels for His grace to flow to other people. God has not asked us to lead Israel out of Egypt or to hurry to Bethlehem to "see this thing which has come to pass." He has not asked us to start the New Testament Christian Church or to reform it. He has simply put us here as teachers in His church to share His message with those whom He has given us. So then, let's consider

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- 1. while teaching the scriptures,**
- 2. in disciplining and**
- 3. to counsel**

The most formal and structured forum in which the teacher uses law and gospel is the scripture lesson for the day or the daily devotion. Every scripture text reveals at least one sin we are guilty of. If the sin is not candidly spelled out, it is at least implied. The text may very frankly accuse us of sins we have committed. (Example: Colossians 3:8-9 - But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other.....) Or a text may condemn us by revealing an act of righteousness we have omitted. (Example: 1 Thessalonians 5:15-18,22 - Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always. Pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances Avoid every kind of evil.) When we teach the scriptures the first purpose of the law (to show us our sin) must be stressed. Let's not be guilty of just suggesting sins, or implying that maybe we're guilty of these sins. We all have sinful natures, so to some degree we all are guilty of all sin. Let's not be shy with the law. The law convicts all of sin. God doesn't grade on percentages. It's either 0% or 100%. And all of our report cards show 0%.

In the same way let's never be stingy with God's grace. Give it as unconditionally and freely as God revealed it. Do all you can to present to children Jesus as their passive Substitute and their active Substitute. To demonstrate what I mean, permit me to discuss four scripture texts. They are simply samples of thousands of other texts we could use. But in each of these four I hope to show how the use of law and/or gospel can be abused and confused and how it can be taught clearly.

The first text is the account of the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple. You know the account well, so I won't print it out. I once sat in a class where the teacher showed the students that Jesus obeyed His parents and the teacher said, "Now, because Jesus obeyed His parents we should obey ours too, shouldn't we? Don't we want to be like Jesus?" Then the teacher pointed out how interested Jesus was in studying the Bible and the teacher said, "We should want to study the Bible too, shouldn't we because we love Jesus, don't we? We should want to be like Christ." That is teaching Christ only as an example, a model for good behavior and it's moralizing at best. It is Calvinism and it is a gross confusion of law and gospel.

A better way to teach the account might be to point out that Jesus obeyed His parents and He gladly heard and learned God's Word. Jesus did what God expects us to do, but we can't because we have sinful natures. If Jesus had disobeyed His parents or if He had had an indifferent attitude towards God's Word, then He would have sinned.

TEACHER: Now, how good are we at obeying our parents and how often do we say, "All right! Bible study again! And we get to memorize more passages! Super!" Do you see how far we are from the way God demands that we be? (gladly hear and learn it)

And teacher, don't be afraid to bare your own soul a little. I'm not suggesting that you turn your classroom into a confessional where you are the parishioner and your students are the priest, but share with your students some sinful attitudes you have had towards authority and towards God's Word. Tell them how you feel about your natural sinfulness, and let them see that like them, you desperately need Jesus.

TEACHER: What do we deserve from God because of our sins? (Obvious answer.) Every less-than-enthusiastic feeling about hearing, learning and memorizing God's Word betrays a sinful attitude that deserves condemnation. Our sinfulness is so shameful. What we deserve from God is so horrible. But what God gives us in Jesus is so wonderful!

Not only did God blame our sin of disobeying authorities and our sin of not loving to learn God's Word on Jesus (Isaiah 53:6), and then God punished Jesus for our sins by taking His life. But Jesus also fulfilled the law of obedience to others and the law of regarding God's Word as holy for us (Romans 5:19). When God looks at us through the righteousness of Jesus, He calls us people who have never disobeyed our parents. He calls us people who just can't get enough of Bible study. What great things God says about us because of Jesus!

I once sat in on a discussion about Jesus' words in Matthew 6:14-15: For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your

Father will not forgive your sins. This is obviously a teaching of the law. The class was given this case history: A woman comes to you distraught and depressed. She says, "I'm so upset. Jesus said that if I don't forgive people the way I'm supposed to, then God won't, forgive my sins. I know I don't forgive people the way I'm supposed to, so that means God doesn't forgive my sins." The teacher of the class asked the students how they would counsel this woman.

Now you could minimize God's seriousness and water down His demands the way one student did when he responded, "Well, Jesus didn't really mean that." !#\$*?! "Jesus was just trying to show people what kind of forgiveness God expects us to try to show to people. Don't worry. God will forgive your sins even if you don't forgive other people the way you should. God understands. He knows you can't forgive the way you should because you are a sinner." Well after the class listened to that student make excuses for God and actually call Jesus a liar, another student raised his hand and said, "This is a clear, true statement of law. God demands righteous living from us and that includes forgiving people perfectly. If we don't keep the demands of the law, there is no forgiveness or eternal life for us. If we don't forgive people perfectly (that's God's will), then we deserve to go to hell. And we all do deserve to go to hell, because none of us fulfills that righteous demand of God's law. But there is good news. Our sins of not forgiving people perfectly were laid on Christ and He paid for them. Plus, while Jesus was on earth He forgave people perfectly for us. We get the credit for the righteous way He treated people. Now when we look to God through faith in Jesus and God looks back at us through the righteousness of Jesus, God declares us to be people who have always forgiven everyone the way God demands. As a result (because of Jesus' righteousness) God forgives us all of our sins.

You see, the first student suggested a way to kind of keep God's Law. And that way had no need for Christ. That way would also lead a person to destruction. The second student saw the sinner trembling, wanting comfort and mercy from God and he gave her the comfort of the gospel - in Christ God has put away all of your sins. This simple, frank statement must be the umbrella over our teaching: Without Christ God's law always condemns us. With Christ there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1).

Or consider last Sunday's historic gospel reading from Matthew 4, the temptation of Christ in the desert. Do we simply teach that since Jesus resisted the devil and refused to bow down to him, therefore we should do the same? Or do we teach that, if He had bowed down, He would have sinned and God's anger would have been against Him? The vital truth of this text is that Jesus resisted Satan for us, for people who are naturally greedy and love self-improvement, especially if the self-improvement includes comfort, pleasure, and you-wait-on-me-please. We deserved condemnation because our nature is not to put the Lord before riches, pleasures, comforts and fame. But (one of my favorite words in the Bible. So often good news follows the word "but" in the Bible.) - But, Christ fulfilled all righteousness for us. And when we look to God through faith in Christ Jesus, God smiles back at us, His children, and He says, "I see you as people who only and always want to worship, adore, praise, glorify and exalt Me as your Lord and King." Isn't what Jesus did for us at the age of 30 great? Don't you love Him?

I've got to include one last text I heard a TV preacher violate recently. An imprint of the bottom of my jaw is still imbedded in the hardwood floor of our living room. Luke 18:18-30:

A certain ruler asked him (Jesus), "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good - except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother'."

"All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, then you will have treasures in heaven. Then come and follow me." When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich

man to enter the kingdom of God," Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus replied, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." Peter said to him, "We have left all we had to follow you!" "I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them, "No one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life."

Obviously Jesus is telling this ruler that he must be willing to give his complete allegiance to the Lord and keep the Lord's will to the letter if he plans to earn heaven for himself. But the man loved riches more than he loved the Lord. He couldn't save himself because he was not righteous. Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." The TV teacher said that most rich people are disqualified from heaven because they have the one thing that can keep them from putting God first in their lives - riches. (This was when my jaw fell.). He implied that poor people don't have any obstacles to prevent them from putting the Lord first in their lives. (Notice he's teaching work righteousness, that a person could possibly earn heaven by keeping the law.) Jesus could have just as easily said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a middle class man, or a poor man, or a welfare/food stamp recipient, or a poverty-stricken man, or a poverty-vowed nun to enter the kingdom of God on their own merits." The rich man's problem was riches. But there are plenty of other created things that stand in the way of our love for Christ. Jesus lists some of them in verse 29: brothers, parents, children, spouses. What Jesus is teaching is that it is impossible for a person to save himself. It's impossible for sinners to fulfill the law. But as Jesus said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." Now comes the gospel. God did the impossible by laying our sins on Himself, bearing them, covering them up with His own blood and making us look righteous in God's sight. In Christ's kingdom camels pass through the eye of a needle as easily as sinners redeemed by the blood of Christ pass through the gates of heaven. In Christ God did the impossible. The gospel proclaims it.

We could go on with other texts. Each text clearly reveals or strongly implies something bad (sinful) about us. Our natural inability to satisfy the demands of God's law even 1/100th of a degree must always be stressed when we teach the law. And Jesus must be presented and offered and given as sole, complete righteousness. As we become veterans at condemning specific sins and offering Christ as specific righteousness in our teaching, we also will become more proficient at using the law and gospel in disciplining.

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2. In disciplining

When I ask a group of parents which they feel more competent to do - teach their children the law or the gospel - which do you think they say? Right! "Go to bed! Be in on time! Finish your supper! Don't fight! Don't be selfish! (and the always dreaded) "You'll do it because I say so and I'm your Mother!" Parent groups I have spoken with in the past two years claim they are quite good at teaching their children right from wrong. (However we parents usually teach our children something is wrong because it offends us, rather than because it offends God.) The startling fact is that a great majority of parents are very willing to humbly and ashamedly admit that they do a very poor job of teaching their children that Jesus is their Righteousness and that without Christ they can do nothing pleasing to God. If parents admit such dereliction of duty, what are we doing as teachers to use the law and gospel in discipline?

If a child is caught in a sin, first of all, call it what it is - not just a foolish mistake or a human boo-boo, but a sin that is offensive to God. Help the student realize that we deserved to be damned because of our sins. Never justify the sin or say "it wasn't so bad". Never excuse it as normal. It is normal to sin. And a child needs to learn that it's normal for sinners to sin (Romans 3:23) - normal, yes, but not right, not acceptable to God.

How people show remorse differs from child to child. Some children cry, but you don't know if they're crying because they've offended God or because they got caught or because Dad's gonna kill 'em or because

"what will my friends think of me now?!?". True contrition is sorrow a Christian feels because he has offended the Lord he loves so dearly. So if a child drenches a box of "Puffs" or if getting a remorseful reaction out of him is as difficult as getting a natural suntan in Wisconsin in February - no matter what his emotional reaction, you can't depend on it for proof of remorse anyhow. Maybe he's sorry because he offended God. We hope so. But maybe he's sorry simply because he got caught.

We can't read hearts. So we can only go on what people tell us. And sometimes what they tell us isn't much. The best thing to do is to ask questions. "How do you feel about what you've done? Why? Do you feel what you did is sinful? Do you feel God should punish you for what you did? Do you feel you deserve to go to hell for this sin? How do you feel about that?" Asking direct probing questions will reveal the condition of the "sinner's" heart (unless he's lying, which could be the case, too). How he answers the above questions dictates whether or not you assure him of forgiveness. In the case of many young people the lips say, I'm sorry I sinned, but the sincerity might be in question. Our job is not to judge sincerity. If a person admits and confesses sin, I don't wait for a second, third or fourth tear before I say, "There's great news!" Tears or no tears, face downcast or lifted high, hands folded or in the pockets makes no difference. If I hear the student say that he's sorry he's a sinner or that he doesn't like the way he is as a sinner, or that he wants to be different, I direct him to Jesus. As a person grows to love his Lord Jesus more and more his contrition will become more and more sincere. The more we love Christ, the more it bothers us when we sin. The gospel gives us the power to love Christ. So give the gospel prime time in your discussion.

Before we continue with teaching Christ as righteousness let me assure you that if you feel inept at using law and gospel -and who of us doesn't to some degree? (There have been times when I couldn't believe the Holy Spirit actually produced fruit as a result of a witness I botched up like crazy. God indeed still does miracles!) - but if you feel you've goofed up in the past, you could never have said anything as damaging as the confusion of law and gospel I recently heard. A child was caught in a sin. The adult said, "Are you sorry for your sin?" The child said, "Sorry!" Adult: OK. Jesus died for your sins. Now try to be good from now on and God will be happy with you." Oh! Shame?

Never, but never make the gospel or God's love conditional: "God will love you, if you're sorry. God will forgive you, if you believe." The gospel is fact: "God-did. God punished sin. God forgives. God saved." Our contrition or faith doesn't affect God's forgiveness or His love for us one bit. It is true that I don't experience and receive His forgiveness if I'm not sorry for my sins and I don't believe I'm forgiven. But God's forgiveness and His love don't depend on the condition of my heart. I've heard too many "God is satisfied if you do your best, God is pleased if you try hard" statements that I fear the problem is worse than one might think. I will be pleased if you do your best. But God isn't pleased with our best. All our righteous acts are like filthy rags. Let's not lower God's standard of good to a human level. The worst one, of course, is "God will love you, if you obey His commandments," implying that we actually can obey God's commands on our own and that God's love for us depends on our behavior. It's easy for all of us to fall into this kind of moralizing and work-righteousness talk, especially when we work with children. And, believe me, I've heard words like this in the Sunday School classrooms and day school classrooms of our church. You probably have too. As a matter of fact, I remember one of the times the lips speaking the words were my lips. So let's all encourage each other to be careful.

I also encourage all of us not to teach children that, since we are Christians, God is pleased with the deeds we do in faith. The Bible does say "without faith it is impossible to please God." (Hebrews 11:6) But it is not my deed that is pleasing to God, but the fact that as I look to God through faith in Christ God looks back at me through the blood and righteousness of Jesus. It is Christ's goodness that pleases God. I could never do anything that is pleasing to God - perfect, pure, holy, sinless - I'm not made out of the kind of stuff that produces righteousness, and neither are you. We were made in the image of Adam and we do a good job of proving it. Here's an example of what I mean. Last Week a Senior girl who lives in Watertown asked me to give her a ride to work. She had five minutes to get there. Her mother forgot to pick her up. I was about 45 minutes behind

schedule already, but I said, "OK, Let's go." Now some people might say I did a good work out of love for Christ - and I did. But my deed was not good. God was not pleased with my deed. You see, these thoughts did occur to me as we drove to the store: "Why didn't she ask someone else to do this. What am I, her personal slave? I've got more important things to do with my time. She had better appreciate what I'm doing for her." - sinful thoughts, for sure! And I didn't like them. Be assured they have been repented of and even admitted and discussed with the girl. But my deed was pleasing to God, not because my action was good and perfect and tight, but because as one of Christ's people I live under the umbrella of His grace and righteousness. God sees me through that righteousness and He calls what Christ did good and pleasing. He sees my deed through all the kind and good amid perfectly loving deeds Jesus did for other people, I get the credit for Christ's righteousness - and so do you.

I make such a point of this because it is our responsibility to present to our children our Lord Jesus in all of His humble grace and awesome glory. It's our duty to give all credit for our salvation and our state of righteousness before God to Christ. Show the children how Jesus' blood covers their sin (passive obedience) and also try to apply Christ's righteous life to the specific; sin (active obedience).

Allow me three similar law and gospel discipline sessions that I've had in the recent past. In the first case I'm Dad (D) and my 5-year-old daughter, Kristin, is (K). My 3-year-old son, Peter, (P) had been in the habit of drawing on the wall with crayons. Kristin knew Dad had warned Pete that, if he wrote on the walls with crayons again, it would be a bare-butt spankin'. Kristin loved it when Peter got spankings. Well, Dad came home from school that day and, you guessed it.

D: Who wrote on the wall?

K: Peter did it! I saw him!

D: Pete, did you do it?

P: No, Daddy. Sissy did it! (Ed. note: "boys never lie")

D: Kristin, are you lying?

K: No. Peter really did it.

D: Kristin, you know it's best to always tell the truth.

K: What will you do to me if I tell the truth?

D: You did it, didn't you? You get the spanking, Kristin,

(Much crying. Dad grows horns and smoke and fire come out of his nostrils.)

15 minutes later:

D: Kristin why did I spank you?

K: Because I wrote on the wall.

D: Who told you not to write on the wall?

K: You did, Dad.

D: And what do you call it when you disobey me and then lie about it?

K: I sinned, Dad. (Tears, gush, sob)

D: Kristin, we sin so easily. (Now I'm teary-eyed too.) It's what we want to do so much, but it's not right. God hates sin so much that He wants to send us to hell because of our sins. But do you know what's great, Kristin?

K: What, Dad?

D: Jesus died to pay for all of our sins. God took your sin of disobeying your Dad and your sins of lying to me away from you and God blamed those sins on Jesus. God said Jesus wrote on the walls with the crayons. God said Jesus disobeyed me and Jesus lied about it. And then God killed Jesus to punish Him for your sins So that God wouldn't have to punish you.

K: Wow, Dad.

D: And do you know what else? When Jesus was a boy He always obeyed His parents and He never told a lie. And God says that He gives to you all the good things Jesus did. When God looks at you through the goodness of Jesus He says Kristin Bitter never disobeys her Dad. She always listens to him and she always tells the truth. That's how good God says you are because of what Jesus did for you.

K: Isn't Jesus great, Dad?

D: He sure is.

K: Promise me you'll tell be more about Jesus again?

D: I will, Babe, I will.

2. Tom's roommate, John, spread false, damaging rumors about Tom. Tom destroyed some of John's possessions in retaliation. C=Counselor

C: Why did you do what you did?

T: I was mad. He had no right to do what he did and I just wanted to get him back.

C: It's natural for us to want to get revenge. But it's wrong, isn't it?

T: I know God says it's wrong, but it feels so right.

C: Do you realize how off-base and how godless our feelings are? We naturally feel it's right to get revenge. But God says, "Don't get him back." And God also says, "Instead, if he says, 'God damn you', you say to him, 'God bless you.' Do good to your enemies." See how far our natural thinking is from God's will? We need to line our thinking up with God's.

T: I know what I did was wrong. I wish I wouldn't have done it.

C: But you did and I'm guessing you want to work this out with John. Before you do, put your sins away. You know that the Bible says "the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all". Give your sins to Jesus. See your sin of revenge being punished as you see Jesus pour out his blood on the cross. And of all the people in the world that have ever gotten mistreated, which one would you say had the greatest reason to want to get revenge?

T: Jesus, of course.

C: And what did He ask His Father to do for His enemies when they were killing Him?

T: Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

C: Isn't Christ amazing, Tom? Jesus showed perfect love to His enemies for you, so that God could look at you through the righteousness of Christ and say, "Tom always does what is best for others. Tom never wants to get revenge. Tom is sinless."

T: Sometimes it's hard to believe Jesus could wash me that clean.

C: I know, but it's true. Believe it and go show John you believe it.

3. A 12th grade student in my religion class, Sam, was disrespectful to a teacher and I heard about it.

C: How do you feel about what you did?

S: Well, I know it was wrong, if that's what you mean.

C: Ja, wrong, but

S: OK, sinful. I know it was sinful. I shouldn't be disrespectful to teachers. They are authorities God has put over me. I know that. I'm sorry for what I did. I'll tell Prof. tomorrow.

C: I'm glad you're such a mature Christian, Sam.

S: Well, I blow it. I make mistakes. I sin. I don't want to, really I don't. I've really grown to love Christ in the past few years. I know what he did for me and I don't like hurting Him.

C: You know one thing about Jesus that really makes my mouth drop open? When Jesus was on the cross paying for all of our sins, including our sins of disobeying our parents and lying to staff members and being disrespectful to teachers - while He was suffering for all of our sins, the guilt of everybody on His

shoulders, at that time the one person in the world who was His authority figure when He was a child, His mother, came to the cross. Did Jesus say, "Sorry, Mother, I've got enough problems of my own right now. I can't think about you. You're going to have to fend for yourself."? No! While He was hanging on the cross He made sure His mother would be taken care of after He was gone. What a selfless act of love. He fulfilled that law of

love for you and me because of all of the times we have failed to show love to those whom God has placed over us. God calls us righteous, loving, caring people when he looks at us through Christ. When I think of what Jesus did for us, sometimes a chill goes down my spine.

S: Isn't Jesus awesome?

Awesome? Maybe not the exact word I would have chosen at that time, but a good word, a word that expressed exactly how Sam felt about Christ. And remember, Sam's still growing, just as I am and just as you are. We always need to be encouraging each other in spiritual growth. So the use of the law and gospel continues as the teacher also functions as the counselor.

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3. To counsel

Hopefully we continue to use the gospel promises of Jesus to help our students move from living under law (Old Adam) to living under gospel (new man), to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Throughout our own lives the Holy Spirit has been using the gospel, spoken to us by others, to move us from being people who live by the written code to people who live in the Spirit. He instructs us to use the same means to help our students grow. Think of yourself 15, 20, 30 or more years ago. Remember what a giant your sinful nature was then. Hopefully, by the grace of God that nature has shrunk considerably through daily contact with God's law and gospel. God will grow up our students spiritually the same way He grew us up - with the gospel. The law is still very vital to us now, as it was in our youth, since what we do is still not the good we want to do; no, the evil we do not want to do - this we keep on doing. The sinful nature's pulse is still beating.

But what a victory is won when the Holy Spirit convinces a person through the gospel that in the reality of Jesus Christ we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code! We live for God, not because we have to, but because we want to - because we have been overwhelmed with how magnificent our Lord Jesus is!

St. Paul teaches this very truth in a most interesting way in Romans 7:1-6. He says

Do you not know, brothers - for I am speaking to men who know the law - that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man.

So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

Paul kind of tells a parable here. He takes a very practical example from life and applies it to our lives as God's people. He simply makes the point that if a man and woman are married, and the man dies, 'then the woman is free to marry another man, and that's not against the law. Since her husband is dead, the marriage is over. Now Paul asks you to imagine that you are a woman - whether you are male or female - imagine that you're a woman and you are married to God's law. Think of yourself as the wife and God's commandments are your husband.

You're married to a perfect husband, you know. He's always right, and he expects his wife to always be right too. Your husband, God's Law is very demanding, but actually everything he asks of his wife is absolutely right. Isn't that a good illustration of our relationship to God's law by nature? God's law is perfect and it's always right. Every day it tells us what to do and what not to do. "Love your neighbor. Do good to your enemies. Don't curse. Be sober. Don't hold grudges. Don't have indecent thoughts." Now Paul says, "Think of God's Law as your husband." Every morning your husband outlines your schedule for the day, and every minute is full of good things for you to do. When he leaves for the day, there's his check list and it all has to be done and done on time.

But here's you, the wife, left with the job of "setting your house in order" - keeping your life free from sin. You're slow, forgetful, lazy, a little sloppy with the housework, huh? Well, your husband, the 'law, comes home for lunch and the house is a disaster - your life is a mess. He takes out his list and says, "From 8:00 to 8:30 you were supposed to do the breakfast dishes, make the beds, vacuum the carpets and dust mop the bedrooms. Did you do all those good things?" "No." "From 8:30 to 9:30 you were supposed to straighten up, dust, wash all the windows in the house and scrub the floors. Did you?" "No. I didn't feel good." From 9:30 to 11:00 you were supposed to paint the outside of the house, mow the lawn and reshingle the roof.' Did you do all those good things?" "No. I started, but Phil Donahue came on." From 11:00 until now you were supposed to refinish the dining room furniture, reupholster the davenport and replace those two cracked sections of concrete in the driveway outside. They still looked cracked to me when I just drove in and now it's noon and how come my lunch isn't ready?!?" Quite a perfect, picky, impossible husband you've got, huh? He just demanded that you fill your life full of good things that are impossible for you to fulfill. And what do you get from this impossible man? Condemnation! You lousy wife! You're going to get it for not doing all the good things I ordered you to do!"

But does your husband, the law, ever lift a finger to help you? No! He just ruthlessly keeps checking off his list. This husband and wife have a miserable life together. And we have miserable lives too, as long as we try to live life thinking that we've got to satisfy the demands of the law by ourselves. If we try to do what God's law demands by ourselves, all we get from our husband is condemnation, As sinners we can't please "the law".

Well, that night the wife is in bed thinking. "I can't stand this impossible life anymore. How can I get out of this awful marriage with this picky husband? I know! Maybe on the way to work tomorrow he'll get killed! Oh, I shouldn't think that!" But that's exactly the situation Romans 7 is talking about. You're the wife and God's law is your husband. You want to get out of this impossible relationship with a husband you can never hope to please. How can you legally get out of it? Paul says, "If her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage." So there is a way out! If the husband dies, then the marriage is over. But is that going to work in this relationship? Sorry! Your husband, the law, will never die. Never! "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." God's law will never die. That means that your marriage to the law can not be dissolved by having the husband die. So is the poor wife stuck with him? And are you stuck being married to God's law of perfect righteousness that you can never hope to fulfill? It kind of looks that way, doesn't it? But there is hope. There is a way out of this marriage to God's law, even if your husband won't die. What's the way out? Well, if the husband won't die to end the marriage, then the wife has to die, right? And that's exactly what Paul says happened to us. "So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death, But now, BY DYING TO WHAT ONCE BOUND US, WE HAVE BEEN RELEASED

FROM THE LAW SO THAT WE SERVE IN THE NEW WAY OF THE SPIRIT AND NOT IN THE OLD WAY OF THE WRITTEN CODE."

Paul says we died when Jesus died. He says the same thing in the previous chapter: "We know that our OLD SELF was crucified with Christ so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin" (or to the law, for that matter). And since we died and are no longer married to the law, we no longer have to answer to our picky, impossible husband. He's still as alive and perfect as ever. But he doesn't have any hold on us because in Jesus we died and ended our marriage to the law.

Then look at who your new husband is. That's right, you get married again. And your new husband is Jesus. Your old husband didn't do a thing to help you clean up your life. But this new husband not only helps you, he actually does everything for you that God's law demanded - the beds, the dishes, and even the reshingling! He did all the good things for us - loving our neighbors, having decent thoughts, doing good to our enemies, loving God with all our hearts - everything! And this is the key to moving from living in the old way of the written code to moving to living in the new way of the Spirit. This is the key to moving from trying to keep God's law imperfectly because we feel we have to, or else, to moving to wanting to do God's will because we know that our husband, Jesus, has already done all the good things perfectly for us, and we couldn't possibly fulfill God's any better than Jesus has already done it for us!

Now, let's apply what that means, We really don't have to love God with all our hearts because Jesus already did that for us. God says we couldn't possibly love Him any better than Jesus already loved Him for us. But when we know what our new husband, Jesus, did for us, don't we want to love God with all our hearts? Sure we do! We don't have to be kind to people and help them if we don't want to, do we? Jesus already helped every person in this world for us. But when we realize that Jesus fulfilled all righteousness so completely for us, don't we want to help other people to show them the love of Christ? Sure we do! We don't have to tell people about how wonderful the Lord is either, because Jesus already proclaimed to the world the goodness and grace of God for us- But when it soaks in that all that God required of me for eternal life has already been fulfilled for me by my Savior, don't I want to tell people about how terrific Jesus is? Sure I do! We Christians who live in the new way of the Spirit serve Christ, not because we have to, not because we had better or God won't like us, and not even to try to pay Jesus back for what He's done for us - we couldn't possibly ever begin to do that anyway - but we serve simply because we want to, because we're married to a magnificent new husband.

I guess what I'm saying is that when we counsel it's again valuable to apply what the gospel says to the specific situation. What does the work Jesus did for me mean to me in how I live my life each day? We need to encourage our students to live in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code. I remember once stating to a colleague in the ministry that we need to present to our youth the total freedom of the gospel. I said, "We need to tell them about the complete righteousness Jesus earned for them and apply it to their lives specifically." His response was: "We can't do that. If we do that, we're just asking for trouble. If we tell them that because of Jesus they don't have to do anything to please God, then they'll just take advantage of the gospel!" Well, let them. If they fall into sin, (and they will), if they choose to shack up with the law again and again, there's only one place they can go for relief, for comfort, for strength, for forgiveness and righteousness - the same place they and we have gone many times before - on our knees to the cross of Jesus. There we can unload our sin and guilt and go away innocent and at peace with God. God has used this same "method" to make us more and more the kind of people He wants us to be. He'll do the same with our students. And in the process He will grow them up. Sin and grace, law and gospel - God knows what He's doing. And God the Holy Spirit will work according to His own agenda and schedule, not mine. But using His tool, the gospel, the power of salvation, He will gradually draw the hearts of our students closer to the Lord Jesus. He will make them love Him more and more. Our duty is to present the Lord Jesus to our students in all of His grace and glory, to tell them that the God who created this universe took on the form of a servant. The God who said, "Let there be!" and there it was, He spent 9 months in the womb of a teenage girl, developing from a tiny fetus into a full-term baby boy. If I could have ordered the delivery room it would have been in a 10-story sanitized hospital with the best team of doctors and nurses I could find. But what did God choose? He was born

in a room where animals eat lunch and supper. There Jesus lay in a feeding trough streaked with the saliva of cows and sheep, looking up at the stars He had created. What a terrific Lord, huh? Would you have expected the Son of God to turn heads with His good looks? But Isaiah says, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." Would you expect God to spend his time with poor people, crippled people, perverted people, deceitful people? Would you expect Him to glorify His Father by getting the death penalty? Our Lord Jesus is so humble in love, so mighty in power and so glorious in majesty that when you are confronted with who He is and what He's done, don't you want to fall in love with Him? Use the tool the Holy Spirit has given to you to present to your students the awesomeness of the Lord, the magnificence, the graciousness, the goodness, the kindness, the greatness (and whatever other "ness" you can think of), so that our students grow to the point where they say, "I love the Lord Jesus. He is so great. I want to be like Him!"

The fact is that we still have sinful natures, so we can't really be like Him. Yet, God has marked us with a seal in Christ, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance. The Holy Spirit lives in us who believe, giving us power to be alive to righteousness. It is the Spirit who produces fruit in our lives. Let's make sure we always present that truth in practice. Let's not be guilty of making our students feel that, if fruits of faith are going to be produced in their lives, then they are the ones who have to initiate, form and produce them. Paul says, "The fruit of the SPIRIT is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control." The fruit is produced by the Spirit. Any Christian should expect to see this fruit being produced in his life. If a person belongs to Christ, then he has the Spirit of Christ. And the Spirit will produce fruit. Expect to see it in your life and the lives of your students. Look for it and when you see it, praise the Spirit for it.

As complicated as using law and gospel may sound, it's really rather simple, isn't it? God asks us to use His law when correction is needed and to use His gospel to build up and empower our students to live godly lives. As we do what He says and speak His words, He will accomplish His purpose in the lives of each of our students. One of the things about the Christian ministry that makes me really love this work is that the buck doesn't stop here. Don't get me wrong. I want to be as faithful in my work as I can be, but, as all of us know, the success of our work does not depend on us, but on the Lord. The buck stops with Him. Through the work He gives us to do and in spite of our failures, He will get done what He has planned for each of our students. That fact gives me comfort, hope and security, And it given us the greatest reason in the world to try to be as proficient at using the law and gospel as we can be for His glory.