

The Difference Between the Law and the Gospel

Pastor Tom Hicks



I am convinced that there is no more important biblical distinction than the distinction between the law and the gospel. Historically speaking, the law/gospel distinction was at the very foundation of the Protestant Reformation. Without the law/gospel distinction, the biblical doctrine of justification sola fide would never have been recovered in the time of the Reformation. So, exactly what is the distinction between the law and the gospel?

1. What the Law/Gospel Distinction is Not.

The distinction between the law and the gospel is not a distinction between the Old and New Testaments. Both Testaments contain God's good law and gracious gospel. The distinction is not meant to deny the absolute importance of the law of God in the life of the believer. Both the law and the gospel are absolutely necessary for the conversion of sinners and the sanctification of saints. The distinction between the law and the gospel does not separate the law and the gospel as though either one may be emphasized, taught, or even understood without the other. Faithful preachers proclaim both law and gospel, the whole counsel of God, not just one or the other.

2. The Law "Broadly Speaking" and the Law "Strictly Speaking."

To set the stage for understanding the distinction between the law and the gospel, first, we need to look at the two different ways the Bible speaks of the law, then we'll need to look at the two ways the Bible speaks of the gospel. First, consider the two different ways the Bible speaks of the law: "broadly" and "strictly." This distinction between the "broad" and "strict" views of the law and the gospel can be found in the writings of the Puritans, including Anthony Burgess, as well as John Colquhoun and others.

The law, broadly speaking, includes commandments as well as a promise and a threat. The law, in this broad sense, is sometimes called the "law covenant," or "the covenant of works," because it has a promise attached to its commands. The law, broadly speaking, commands perfect obedience and promises eternal life to those who obey it perfectly, but it threatens death to those who break it. We find Scripture speaking this way in various passages. Romans 10:5 says, "For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandment shall live by them." Notice that God promises "life" to those who "do" the commands. Galatians 3:12 says, "The law is not of faith, rather, 'The one who does them shall live by them.'" Galatians 3:10 threatens the curse of death to those who break the law, "For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them.'" So you see that the law, broadly speaking, is a covenant of works, which promises justification and eternal life to anyone who perfectly obeys the law, but threatens death to those who break it. Now that we have a basic understanding of the law, broadly speaking, let's consider the law, strictly speaking.

The law, strictly speaking, is commandments, without any promises or threats attached to them. While the law, broadly speaking, is a covenant, promising life to those who obey it, and threatening death to those who break it, the law, strictly speaking, is not a covenant because it has no promises or threats, but only involves the commandments. Sometimes this strict way of looking at the law is called the "naked law" or the "bare law." The law, strictly speaking, is the Ten Commandments. Scripture speaks

of the law in this strict sense in several places. Romans 7:22 says, “For I delight in the law of God in my inner being.” Romans 8:4 says that Christ came, “in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.” Paul says that we are not “outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ” (1 Cor 9:21). Believers are told to “fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). James speaks of “the law of liberty” (1:25; 2:12) and the “royal law” (2:8), both of which refer to the Ten Commandments (2:10-11). In the new covenant, the law in its strict sense is written on our hearts. God says, “I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel . . . I will put my laws into their minds and write them on their hearts” (Heb 8:8-10). Notice that none of these passages refer to the law as the way to justification and eternal life, but only as a guide, or rule, to direct the believer in his sanctification.

In sum, the law, broadly speaking, is a covenant because it includes commands as well as the promise of life and the threat of death. The law, strictly speaking, is stripped of its covenantal context, and includes only the commandments without any promises or threats attached to it.

3. The Gospel "Broadly Speaking" and the Gospel "Strictly Speaking."

Just as Scripture speaks broadly and strictly of the law, it also speaks broadly and strictly of the gospel.

The gospel, broadly speaking, includes a promise and commands, just as the law does in its broad sense. While the law, broadly speaking, says, “do this and live,” the gospel, broadly speaking, says, “live and do this.” Do you see how promise and command are inverted under the gospel? The law broadly speaking says, “Keep all the commandments perfectly, and you will be justified and live forever.” But the gospel, broadly speaking, says, “Because of Christ’s obedience, death, and resurrection, you are justified freely and will live forever; now, keep His commandments!” Under the gospel, promise comes first, and then comes the commandments. Consider some passages that teach the gospel commands obedience from those who receive its promise. Hebrews 8:6 says that the law of the new covenant is “enacted on better promises.” That is, the commands of the new covenant are based on effectual, saving, justifying promises. 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8 warns those who “do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” will go to hell. That’s because all those freely given justification and life in Christ will always have a pattern of obedience in their lives. To fail to obey the gospel, broadly speaking, is to manifest unbelief in the gospel promise. Romans 10:16 says, “They have not all obeyed the gospel.” And 1 Peter 4:17 warns those who “do not obey the gospel of God.” So, when the Bible speaks of disobeying the gospel, it’s referring to the gospel in this large sense: “live and do this.” Which law are believers to obey under the gospel, broadly speaking? They are to obey the moral law of the Ten Commandments. Notice that the Ten Commandments cut across the law broadly speaking, the law strictly speaking, and the gospel broadly speaking. The same moral law informs obedience under all three. That’s because the moral law of God, summarized in the Ten Commandments, is a reflection of God’s own holy character, which never changes. So, there, we’ve seen what the gospel, broadly speaking, means. Now let’s turn to look at the gospel, strictly speaking.

The gospel, strictly speaking, is a pure promise, and there are no commands involved at all. While the gospel, broadly speaking, commanded obedience on the basis of God’s promise of eternal life, the gospel, strictly speaking, issues no commands whatsoever. In the gospel, strictly speaking, Jesus has already fulfilled the terms of the law broadly speaking. Jesus obeyed the command, “Do this and live.” He perfectly kept all of God’s laws, including the moral law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, as well as all of the positive laws of both the Old and New Testaments. He also died for the sins of His people against the law of God, paying the death penalty that they deserve, becoming a curse for them on the cross. And how do we know that Christ earned eternal life by His obedience? He rose from the dead! His resurrection proves that He perfectly fulfilled the terms of the law, broadly speaking.

Scripture often speaks in this strict way about the gospel. “Christ “was delivered for our trespasses and raised again for our justification” (Rom 4:25). “My Father gives you the true bread from heaven” (Jn 6:32). “This is the promise that He made to us - eternal life” (1 Jn 2:25). “Now I would remind you brothers of the gospel . . . that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised, in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:1-4). So, the gospel, strictly speaking, is about God’s work for us in Christ, and the absolutely free gift of our justification and eternal life in Him.

The gospel, strictly speaking, is the reason justification is by "faith alone" and not by any of the believers' own works of obedience to the law. Christ has already fulfilled the law's demands in our place and thereby satisfied justice, which is why God justifies Him and all who are in Him by faith alone. No other works can possibly be added to Christ's justice-satisfying works for our justification because no other works can possibly be necessary.

In sum, the gospel, broadly speaking, says “Live and do this,” while the gospel strictly speaking says, “Live because Christ has done all.” The gospel broadly speaking, includes commands, while the gospel, strictly speaking, is stripped of all commands, and holds forth the promise of justification and eternal life.

4. The Law/Gospel Contrast in Justification.

When the Bible speaks of the law/gospel contrast, it refers to the contrast between the law, broadly speaking, and the gospel, strictly speaking. Under the law, broadly speaking, a person must keep the law himself in order to receive the promise of justification and eternal life. Under the gospel, strictly speaking, Christ has kept the law Himself in order to obtain and freely give justification and eternal life to all of His people as a pure promise. John Colquhoun says, “The former [the law, broadly speaking] promises eternal life to a man on condition of his own perfect obedience, and of the obedience of no other; whereas the latter [the gospel, strictly speaking] promises it [eternal life] on condition of the perfect obedience of Christ received by faith, and that of no other.” So, the law/gospel contrast is about two different ways to be justified and have eternal life. You can either try to keep the law in its broad sense to earn the promise of eternal life yourself, or you can look to Christ, who kept the law in your place, and promises justification and eternal life as a free gift in the gospel, strictly speaking.

The Bible frequently makes this distinction between the law, broadly speaking (as a covenant of life) and the gospel, strictly speaking (as a pure promise of life). Consider just a few examples of this distinction found in the book of Romans. Romans 3:27-28 says, “Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? [i.e., the law, broadly speaking]? No, but by the law of faith [in the gospel, strictly speaking]. For we hold that one is justified by faith [in the gospel promise] apart from the works of the law [to obtain justification and eternal life].” Romans 4:5 says, “And to the one who does not work [under the law, broadly speaking], but trusts him who justifies the ungodly [by trusting the gospel, strictly speaking], his faith is counted as righteousness.” Romans 10:4 says, “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness [the law, broadly speaking] to everyone who believes [in the gospel, strictly speaking].” Romans 10:5-6 says, “For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandment shall live by them [that is, the law, broadly speaking], but the righteousness based on faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ [that is, trust the gospel, strictly speaking, rather than trying to ascend into heaven by your own works]”

So, the law/gospel contrast is about justification, the verdict that gives us a right and title to eternal life.

Now, we turn to the gospel/law continuum in sanctification.

5. The Gospel/Law Continuum in Sanctification.

While there is a law/gospel contrast in justification, there is a gospel/law continuum in sanctification. When we speak of the continuum between the gospel and the law, we're referring to the gospel, broadly speaking, and the law, strictly speaking. There is, in fact, no separation between the gospel, broadly speaking, and the law, strictly speaking in the believer's sanctification. The gospel, broadly speaking, says "Receive this free gift of justification and eternal life, and then keep the commandments from a heart of love to God." The law, strictly speaking, says, "keep the commandments from a heart of love to God." These two overlap perfectly.

The gospel/law continuum teaches us that in sanctification, believers must keep the law of God because God has already promised them eternal life. Believers obey from a heart of love and gratitude to Christ for their salvation and to give evidence of their faith in Christ's promise. In sanctification, the law has no curse and no promise of eternal life. It is only a rule of life, teaching the believer how to express love for Christ and grow in communion with Him. There is no threat or condemnation in the law, strictly speaking.

Scripture is clear that believers must and will keep God's commandments because of Christ's love for them and because they love Christ. Consider a few passages from the Apostle John. In John 14:15, Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And in John 14:21, "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him, and manifest myself to him." John 15:10 says, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love." 1 John 2:3 says, "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments." 1 John 3:7-8 says, "Little children, let no one deceive you, whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil."

So, there, we've seen the differences and similarities between the law and the gospel, both broadly and strictly. Now, let's look at the uses of this distinction. Why is this so important for believers to understand?

6. The Law/Gospel Contrast in Justification Assures the Fearful and Humbles the Proud.

Many believers live in a state of fear and depression because they're not sure whether they actually belong to Christ. Too often, the only thing they can see in their hearts is sin. And they fear that their good works are not truly good because they seem to come from mixed motives. But the law/gospel contrast in justification teaches sinners to look away from themselves and their good works and rest in Christ alone and His good works for justification and eternal life. The gospel, strictly speaking, is the very foundation of our assurance of salvation before God. Because of Christ's obedience and blood, we can have a certain and unshakable hope that heaven belongs to us, if we only look to Him in faith, resting in Him for justification. When our sinful hearts accuse us, we should preach Christ to ourselves, looking to Him and His righteousness alone for our acceptance before God. When Satan accuses us of evil and hypocrisy, we can say with Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, "All this is true; and much more which you have left out: but the Prince whom I serve and honor is merciful and ready to forgive."

Some people are proud and self-righteous like the Pharisees. They think of themselves as good people because they are religious, because they perform religious rituals, and because they do outwardly good

works. They don't trust in Christ alone for their justification, but are partly trusting in their own works as a means of justification before God (Lk 18:9-12). But the law/gospel contrast humbles proud sinners. The law, broadly speaking, demands absolute perfection for justification and eternal life. When proud people come face to face with their own sin in light of the law in the hand of the Holy Spirit, they see that their hearts are wicked, and they give up every hope of trying to justify themselves. They throw themselves on the mercy of Christ alone for justification in the sight of God, which is offered by the gospel, strictly speaking (Lk 18:13-14).

7. The Gospel/Law Continuum in Sanctification Directs and Motivates Our Obedience to Christ.

The gospel/law continuum directs the Christian in how to express love for the Savior who bought him. Many Christians wonder what God expects of them. They love Him, but they aren't sure exactly what God wants them to do; so, they end up doing what seems right to them. But that's not the biblical approach. Christians should express their love for Christ by keeping His law, summarized in the Ten Commandments. The law of God directs the Christian's obedience in sanctification. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15). The word "keep" in that verse means "to watch, guard, or have respect to." Faithful Christians express their love for Jesus by thinking about how to keep the Ten Commandments in every circumstance. They grow wise by constantly turning the law of God over in their minds, and learning to apply all its different aspects to every decision they make. And then they actually obey Christ's commandments, more and more, as they learn what He expects of them. This is how God's law directs Christians, often called "Calvin's third use of the law."

The gospel/law continuum also motivates our obedience from the promise of eternal life. The gospel, broadly speaking, says, "live and do this." The greatest motivation to obey Christ is knowing that He has freely and lovingly given eternal life to those who belong to Him. We love Him because He first loved us, and gave Himself up for us! We keep His commandments because He's shown us that He's good and holds nothing good back from us. So, we trust that His commandments are for our good, and we gladly obey them. 1 John 5:3 says, "His commandments are not burdensome" to the believer. And we obey His commandments because we know that He has given them to us as the way to know Him more, to commune with Him, and to enjoy Him forever!