

The Disastrous Results of Despising God's Law

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May God grant you all much grace and peace by the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In our Savior, beloved listeners!

Surely there is no doctrine of divine revelation, which is not at times disputed by false teachers, as incredible as this seems. Among these doctrines is, among others, also the doctrine of the Law. Who would think that a man might cast aside the Law, when this doctrine is not only written in the Bible, but also engraved in the hearts of all men including the heathen? And yet men have done just this.

Three hundred years ago Luther reclaimed the sweet Gospel from the dust. He used it to establish the poor frightened consciences who had toiled in vain in their own works and comforted them by the doctrine of God's free grace in Christ.

Right away, completely against Luther's expectations, a sect arose which claimed that within the Christian church one should no longer preach the Law, but only the Gospel. The members of this sect were called Antinomians, or rejectors of the Law. The sect's founder was a certain Agricola, a preacher at Eisleben in Saxony.

Do not think, however, that these rejectors of the Law did not appeal to the Scriptures. No error in Christendom, no matter how obvious, has ever arisen which has not been defended and justified by misinterpreted Bible passages. So also here.

Now the chief Bible "proof text" cited by the Antinomians was the statement of St. Paul: "Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man." (I Timothy 1:9). From this they wished to prove that the Law should not be preached to those who are baptized and are justified by faith. Such should not be frightened by the Law, but rather led to heaven by the preaching of grace alone.

However, Paul's words have an entirely different meaning. He wants to say as much as this: *to the extent* that a man is made righteous by faith, *to the extent* that he has a new heart and a spirit willing to do God's will in all things, *to that extent* such a believing, born-again Christian does not need the Law. For he does not need to be frightened and forced by threats to do good; he does good by himself, voluntarily, because of love.

Yet what Christian can say that he is already completely spiritual, that he is completely filled with the desire and love for all good things, and feels absolutely no rebellion of the fleshly nature? John answers this in the name of all Christians: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us...and we make God a liar." (I John 1:8, 10). St. Paul agrees when he confesses: "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing." (Romans 7:18a).

Here, friends, is the reason why even believing Christians will still need the Law: they still bear the burden of their sinful flesh lusting against the Spirit, which indeed needs to be crucified and terrified and kept under restraint by the Law.

What is likely to happen if within the Christian church the Law were no longer preached, but only the Gospel?

Soon both Law and Gospel would be lost, and everything would perish in security and corruption. Therefore Luther, in his church message on today's text, Matthew 22:34-46, says concerning the doctrines of the Law and of the Gospel: "If one of the two is lost, it takes the other along with it, and likewise where the one remains and is rightly used, it brings the other along with it."

Sadly we cannot ignore the fact that many among us nowadays wish to hear of practically nothing but grace, setting aside the eternally binding doctrine of the Law. Therefore I want to warn you today against the disastrous results of despising the Law.

Scripture text: Matthew 22:34-46. But when the Pharisees had heard that he had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together. Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, Saying, What think ye of Christ? whose son is he? They say unto him, The son of David. He saith unto them, How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand till I make thine enemies thy footstool? If David then call him Lord, how is he his son? And no man was able to answer him a word, neither durst any man from that day forth ask him any more questions.

My friends, the text just read treats both the doctrine of the Law and the doctrine of Christ, or the Gospel. This gives me the opportunity to speak to you on

THE DISASTROUS RESULTS OF DESPISING GOD'S LAW.

1. It is the Reason why so Many also Despise the Gospel, and therefore
2. So Many Deceive Themselves with a False Faith.

{Prayer:} Lord, Thou art Holy. Thou art not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness. The wicked will not stand in Thy sight. We therefore beseech Thee to rule us through Thy Holy Spirit so we would not carelessly tolerate sin and abuse Thy grace, but rather in good works earnestly long for eternal life. To that end awaken us now by Thy word for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

[1. The Despising of God's Law is the Reason why so Many Despise the Gospel]

It is true, my friends, that only the doctrine of the Gospel shows sinners the way to salvation. Yet why did Christ, as our text reports, not only preach the Gospel to the Pharisees, but also answered their question about the true content of the Law?

Because without the help of the Law no one arrives at the proper understanding of the Gospel, and because people reject the Gospel for the very reason that they despise the Law.

Those who reject the Gospel today allege, as did the Pharisees, that they consider the Law alone sufficient, or, as they express it so glibly in our time, that ethics, that is, the doctrine of virtue, uprightness and good works, is all they want. For, they say, "All that really matters is to be a good person. Those and those only who lead a clean, moral life can be called religious." Sad to say, these are merely so many empty words.

The Pharisees' and the present unbelievers' rejection of the Gospel is not due to their desire to bear the entire burden of the Law and to keep it truly as God wants it kept. On the contrary! Men in our time no longer heed or believe the demands and threats of God's Law. Therefore they deem the comfort of the Gospel of very little or no value.

The Gospel shows how you can receive forgiveness of your sins, how you can be delivered from God's wrath and receive His pardon, how you can be rescued from hell and eternal damnation, and saved by pure mercy.

Now just as only the sick seek a doctor, as only the starving crave bread, as only the perishing cry out for rescue, so only those know how to treasure the Gospel and to accept it with joy who have in terror recognized their own sinfulness. Only they are ready for the Gospel who believe that they are indeed the objects of God's wrath, and have indeed deserved nothing but death and damnation by their sins.

Now do those who despise the Gospel perhaps submit more conscientiously to the Law?

Not at all. Most of the foes of the faith live in manifest sins and shame, cursing and blaspheming, anger and thirst for vengeance, drunkenness and gluttony, unchastity and adultery, lies, deceit, false oaths, yes, in hatred so great as to commit murder.

They could not care less about any law, human or divine, nor about God, hell, heaven, or a future judgment. They say with Pharaoh: "*Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice?*" (Exodus 5:2). Or as Isaiah says: "*The shew of their countenance doth witness against them; and they declare their sin as Sodom, they hide it not.*" (Isaiah 3:9a).

Is not that contempt for God's Law?

Nevertheless it cannot be denied that there are many unbelievers who abstain from all such gross outbreaks of sin. Many live honorably in the eyes of the world, and their overall outward behavior before men earns them the reputation of being strict, moral people. But where is there an unbeliever who really perceives the essence and consequences of sin?

What unbeliever really is convinced that God has a right to demand that he be holy and perfect? What unbeliever sees that some day he will have to give account to God for every idle word which fell from his lips?

Who among them realizes that merely an evil desire, an impure lust, an ungodly thought is a great sin?

What unbeliever really thinks it true that he is an abomination in God's sight for merely indulging in proud thoughts, when he covets the least honor from men, if he is not gentle and humble from the heart and regards himself as nothing?

Which unbeliever really believes that the mere seeking after riches and good days plunges him into eternal damnation? Or that in God's eyes he is a murderer if he is merely angry with his neighbor? Or that even the least sin is a terrible insult to the great God and earns him eternal death?

What unbeliever, though he may live ever so honestly and blamelessly before men, is filled with fear and trembling at the smallest sin?

Which unbeliever watches and prays daily lest he fall into temptation?

Which one battles unceasingly so his soul might contain nothing but pure love to God and his neighbor?

Are they not guilty of thousands of sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, which they consider insignificant, and over which they themselves often laugh and joke?

Here, my friends, you have the real reason why so many despise the Gospel of Christ and of His grace. Not because they live so piously that they need no Savior; not because they are now too wise and enlightened for that.

No! The reason is that they despise God's Law, by which God tells them how man ought to be. The reason is that they do not believe God's threats, His just and severe judgment, and the eternal punishment which will follow sin.

You see here the real root of their unbelief! It is just this, this contempt, which minimizes the importance of sin.

It is this Pharisaical conceit and belief in their own great worth, this horrible blindness in which they do not recognize their daily, hourly transgressions in their greatness and number. This is why they loathe the doctrine of grace. This is why they hate so deeply Christ the Crucified and His holy, precious atonement.

Once a person begins to take the Law of God doctrine seriously, then he certainly is not far from Christ and His kingdom either.

Why was it that at Luther's time the Gospel was received with such great, almost universal joy?

Why was it that then within a short period of time entire countries were converted? Why did the message of peace spread like wildfire over the whole known world? Why did thousands and thousands of hearts immediately open to the courageous herald of the Gospel, kissed the booklets he published with tears and joy, and gladly thanked God for His precious visitation of grace?

Why did the preaching of the Gospel have such great, glorious results then, and not now?

Here is why. At the time of the Reformation the poor people had been oppressed by the burden of the Law. For even in the midst of the preceding dark ages the unspiritual priests had yet sharply proclaimed the Law. Great numbers were therefore filled with deep concern for their salvation, and with great fear and anxiety of eternal damnation. Great numbers felt their sins. That is why the Gospel was such a blessed message to their ears, just as those are blessed whose prison gates are opened and who are told: "You are free!" But this preparation of men's hearts by the workings of the Law is now generally missing.

And why was it that Luther had to complain so soon that the men of his times were tired of the Gospel? It was because most misused the Gospel freedom and again became secure, no longer heeded the threats of the Law, and again considered their sins unimportant.

Thus the Gospel, too, was soon despised again, a contempt which has reached its peak in our days.

[2. The Despising of God's Law is the Reason Why so Many Deceive Themselves with a False Faith]

A second disastrous result of despising God's Law is the false faith by which many deceive themselves.

Unfortunately there are not a few who live in manifest sins, yet imagine themselves as standing securely in the true faith. They let their angry temper rule them, but they think that faith makes up for that.

They are not honest and conscientious in their dealings with others. They grab as much as they can get, and faith is supposed to make up for that, too. They are delinquent debtors defrauding their creditors by living as though they owed no one anything - and faith supposedly covers that, too.

They tell lies, do not forgive offenses, are vain in their clothing, worldly in their conduct, friends of the children of the world, vainglorious, inflated with self-esteem, greedy, slanderous - and all this faith is supposed to excuse.

Oh, the pitiful foolishness of it! They cite St. Paul's statement according to which man is saved by grace. But they do not recall that the same apostle also says: *"Now the works of the flesh are manifest...of the which I tell before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God."* (Galatians 5:19, 21). And in another place: *"For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries."* (Hebrews 10:26, 27).

Others are not living in such manifest sins. But they are lukewarm and indolent.

They are not in earnest about being real Christians. Their Christianity is no more than idle talk, a shallow pretense. Their prayers come from their lips only. Their reading and hearing of God's word is no thirsty drinking from the well of eternal life. They use it merely to become smarter and to criticize the sermon in proud conceit.

They do not watch their heart. They do not battle against flesh and blood. They are surly toward their family. They argue about temporal and foolish things. If not already completely hardened, they too suppose that while they might not be as good as they ideally ought to be, they nevertheless are Christians and righteous before God, because they have faith.

Thus Christ is made a servant of sin, and faith a cloak for disgrace! Thus men deceive themselves and lose life and salvation. For a "faith" bearing such fruit is a faith of froth and foam, nothing but fleshly security, nothing but a dead barren thing leading to hell at a fast pace.

But whence comes this self-deception? It arises from nothing else than contempt for God's holy Law. It teaches that the Law no longer concerns the believer, that he need no longer obey its demands nor fear its threats. What a dreadful delusion! Christ clearly says: *"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven,"* that is, *nothing*. (Matthew 5:17-19a).

It is true that the believer, *as a believer*, is no longer subject to any law, but is free and stands above all laws. For *in Christ* he has perfect fulfillment of the Law, and has the Holy Spirit who in him wants to do what is good, without any law.

But the believer as God's creature and as a sinner is still under the Law. For the Law is the revelation of God's will. It is therefore eternal and unalterable. It cannot possibly be replaced by faith, as little as God can change Himself and permit a creature to sin.

St. Paul, therefore, says: "*Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid; yea, we establish the law.*" (Romans 3:31). The apostle means that our sins are not forgiven so we can now act contrary to the Law, but just because we have received the Holy Spirit through whom we become new men (II Corinthians 5:17), receive a new heart and a new mind, so that we now actually begin to fulfill the Law truly, from the heart.

Therefore, dear listener, if you do not wish to fulfill the Law with all zeal at your command, to love God above all, and your neighbor as yourself; if you do not want to live in constant dread of sin and of God's wrath, if you do not want to pursue sanctification with all dedication - know that your alleged faith won't help you!

It will rather make you all the more repulsive to God and condemn you the more. For in this case you would have confessed that you wanted to accept Christ as your Savior, but merely turned Him into a servant of sin, and counted the blood of His holy redemption an unclean thing.

If you think that because you have accepted the Gospel you can despise the Law, and live without care, without earnestly striving against sin day and night - the threats of the Law still apply to you.

It won't help you at all to claim that you are seeking the protection of Christ against the accusations and condemnations of your conscience. For in Christ there is protection only for those who were terrified by the Law, who would so much like to fulfill it, and who therefore desperately yearn for the grace, power and help of the Holy Spirit.

If you do not earnestly want to be free of your sins, God will not cover your sins by forgiveness either.

*No sated spirit seeks the Cross
While trifling carelessly with sin.
While hugging to his heart the dross
Which he must lose, to enter in
At heaven's narrow gate. Oh, break,
Proud heart, and to your need awake!*

Oh, that many among us might have received a blow from our text to awaken their sleeping hearts! I beg all these: Oh, for the sake of Christ and your salvation, take good care indeed of this call by the Holy Spirit. Oh, do not thoughtlessly suppress His stirring in you.

In this very hour begin a better Christianity. In the quiet of your heart think on the pretense wherewith you have comforted yourselves up to now. Call upon God to convert your pretense into reality, your lip service Christianity into a Christian life of power, your hypocrisy into deed and truth.

Do not despise my voice.

It is not I who speak. It is God who stands at the door of your heart through his word.

Will the lamp of your sham Christianity help you when you, like the foolish virgins, lack the oil of the *true* faith, *the Spirit and the power*?

Oh, think of the last hour when you will hear: "The bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him!" Then there will be no time to buy oil. Then you will cry in vain: "Lord, Lord, open to us." The Lord will answer you: "Verily I say unto you, I know you not."(Matthew 25:12).

Therefore, Christians, to arms! Up, arise!

With the courage of faith take hold on the Word!

The battle is fearful, yet yields you the prize:

The best of all treasures, the joy of the Lord.

With Christ you will safely emerge from the fight.

To His peace, His salvation, His rest, and His light. Amen.
