

THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE!

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Old Testament Lesson; Amos 5:6-15

Epistle Lesson; Hebrews 3:1-6

Sermon Text; Mark 10:17-27

On occasion, it is important to review the two main teachings in scripture. And sometimes, the Bible reading particularly lends itself to that. And so, I want to begin with a very quick review of the two main teachings in all of scripture, because I am going to be using the words, “law and gospel, law and gospel, law and gospel,” throughout this sermon. I want everyone here to be aware what is the Law and what is the Gospel. Those are the two main teachings in scripture.

The Law is God's commands to you. The Law puts all of the weight and all of the pressure on you. The Law makes demands of you. It says, “do this” and “don't do that”. And so, the Law, these commands of God, put all of the weight on you. We summarize them in the Ten Commandments, which are the Law of God.

As we begin to compare ourselves to the Law, we see the Law says, “Be perfect.” “Be holy.” “Be sinless.” We begin to see that we are not perfect. We are not holy. We are not sinless. We haven't kept the Law the way we should and the Law shows what we deserve, when we are not perfect. It shows that we deserve to be condemned, when we are not perfect. That is the Law.

Now, on the other hand, the other main teaching in the Bible is the

Gospel. The Gospel is not a command, like the Law is. **The Gospel is a promise.** The Gospel doesn't put any weight on you. The Gospel puts all of the weight on someone else. It puts all of the weight on Jesus. **The Gospel is the Good News!** That is what the word Gospel means.

•It is the Good News of what Jesus has done, for you.

•It is the Good News that Jesus lived a perfect life, for you!

•It is the Good News that Jesus died, for your sins.

•It is the Good News that you are saved, not because of what you have done, but by what Jesus has done.

Nothing but good news! Nothing but a promise - **whoever believes shall be saved.**

So, we have these two great teachings in scripture, the Law and the Gospel.

CFW Walther was the president of Concordia Lutheran Seminary in St. Louis. In the late 1800's, on Sunday evenings, he delivered a series of famous lectures to the seminary students. This series of lectures, known as "The Proper Distinction Between the Law and the Gospel," is recognized as one of the most valuable series of lectures ever given. On December 12th, 1864 he made the following statement to his seminary students. I want you to listen very carefully to what he said. He said, "The Word of God is not rightly divided, when the Law is preached to those who are already in terror, because of their sin."

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He went on to say, "The Word of God is not rightly divided, when the Gospel is preached to those who are still secure in their sin."

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Let me give you some examples from scripture. Let's look at some people who were in terror, because of the Law. Let's look at some people who realized that they had messed up. They had not kept God's commands, His Law. They were in serious trouble. They knew that they deserved to be condemned by God. They were in terror, in their conscious, because they had not kept God's Law, and they understood what they deserved.

Examples:

- Remember the person the Bible called “a sinful woman”? She was troubled by what she had done. She was in terror, because of the Law.

- Remember the one the Bible calls “the woman who was caught in adultery”? She was terrified, because she had done wrong and what she deserved.

- Remember the thief on the cross? He looked at God's Law and he realized that he had not kept it. He was in terror, as he was about to face the judgments of Hell.

Now, what did Jesus do to those people? Did Jesus preach the Law to them? Did Jesus preach the Law to that woman who was caught in adultery? Did He say, “*Well, you better try harder to keep the Law, because that is the only way you can earn yourself to Heaven.*” Did He say, “*You have done wrong and now you deserve to be condemned?*” She was terrified! So, what did Jesus say to her? Nothing but Gospel. **Nothing but Gospel.** He said, “Neither do I condemn you.” It was a promise. Her sins were forgiven.

To the woman that the Bible calls “a sinful woman”, Jesus said, “Her many sins are forgiven.” Nothing but Gospel did He preach to her.

To the thief on the cross, it was nothing but Gospel. Jesus said, “Today you will be with me, in paradise.” It was nothing but good news that his sins were forgiven.

Which brings us to today's scripture reading. When I was a boy, this

scripture reading always baffled me. Jesus is all about the Gospel. He is all about dying on the cross to pay for our sins and forgiving us freely. That is the only way to get to Heaven. So, in today's scripture reading, we have this young man who comes to Jesus. He was an upstanding young man, who was wondering how you get to Heaven. And, what does Jesus say? It always baffled me, as a child, because Jesus did not say to this young man, "*Well, you get to Heaven by believing that I am your Savior from sin*". That is not what Jesus told that young man. In fact, Jesus withheld the Gospel. He withheld the Gospel from this young man. Remember Walther's statement: "The Word of God is not rightly divided, when the Gospel is preached to those who are still secure in their sin."

Now, think about this young man. He was still secure in his sin. The Gospel would have been meaningless to him. First, he needed to be convicted of his sin by the law before he saw his need for the Gospel.

The Bible says he was a rich, young ruler. We know that he was a ruler in the synagogue. In other words, he was like a leader in the church. So, this was somebody that any parent would have been proud of. It would be great to have him as a neighbor. This was someone who had risen to leadership in the church, quite quickly. Probably, today, it would be comparable to somebody who, as a child, went to Sunday School every Sunday, went to Christian Day School, got confirmed, stayed very active in youth group, when he was a youth. When he was going to college, stayed very active in the church, gave to church. And, as a young man, became prominent, a prominent leader in the church.

He was also wealthy. Today, probably somebody who drives a nice car, has a wonderful job, and a nice home.

This young, rich ruler comes to Jesus. He comes to Jesus with a

very sincere question. He says, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

I want to put stress on three words. He asked Jesus this question,

“What

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to inherit eternal life?”

How did that young man think he could get to Heaven? By the Law. By God's commands. What **must I do** to inherit eternal life? Now, instead of telling that young man, “*Well, you don't have to do anything to get to Heaven. Just believe in me, as your Savior, as the One who forgives your sins.*” Instead, Jesus said, “You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'”

What was Jesus saying? “*If you want to do something to get to Heaven, keep the commandments.*”

And, what did the young man respond? The young man responded, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

You see, this young man thought that he was not a sinner. If Jesus would have told him the Gospel, if Jesus would have said, “*I have come to forgive your sins,*” That would have been like throwing pearls to swine. If you throw a pearl to a pig, that pearl doesn't mean anything to a pig. It means nothing. If Jesus had told this young man, “*How do you get to Heaven? Trust in me, as your Savior from sin*”, it would have meant nothing. This young man still thought that he could get to Heaven by keeping God's Law. And so, he said, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

Now, Jesus still withholds the Gospel from this young man. It is like He backs up a dump truck and dumps the Law on this young man. He just dumps it on his shoulders, when He says, “One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven. Then come, follow me.”

The Bible says the young man's face fell and he went away sad, because he was very wealthy. Now, what had happened? Jesus had said to this young man, “*You want to do something to get to Heaven? You have not done enough, yet. You haven't done enough, yet. Look at your possessions. How dear are they to you? How important are they to you? Are you ready to part with them? Are you ready to part with all of your money? Are you ready to use your money, not for yourself, but for other people, totally for others? Then go, sell everything that you have, give to the poor, come and follow me.*”

That young man's heart was struck by the Law. That young man began to realize, “*I love my money more than I love God. I have an idol in my life. I have a false god in my life.*” And, he was troubled by the Law. He began to realize that he had not done what it took to earn his way to Heaven. At which point Jesus turned to His disciples, His followers, and He said, “How hard it is, how hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!”

And then, He rephrased it, when He said, “Children, how hard it is (not just for the rich) how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God!” And then, He went even further. He 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.”

Now, take a needle, look at the little eye in the needle. Can a camel go through the eye of a needle? It is impossible. **It is impossible.** And, the disciples understood what Jesus was saying. They said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”

“Who then can be saved?”

If a rich man can't keep the Law perfectly, if we are all sinners, if it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for me to get into Heaven by keeping God's Law, who can be saved?

Jesus is here preaching against what we call 'self righteousness'.

Anybody who thinks, “*I am good enough to get to Heaven on my*

own” there is a real warning that Jesus gives. It is a real warning.

It is impossible to get to Heaven that way.

That can happen to all of us. Maybe it is not money or riches that you cling to more than God. I heard a sermon the other day, and it just struck at my heart, how we, as faithful churchgoers also have to be careful of self-righteousness, thinking, “*We are good enough to get to Heaven on our own.*” Now, we believe here in the ELS, in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, that we are staying faithful to the Word of God. However, there is a church body, a different Lutheran church body that has started to stray from the Word of God. Well, this pastor preached a sermon to his members, and he began this way. (He just slightly tweaked a parable Jesus told.) He said, “Two Lutherans went into church to pray. The one, an ELS Lutheran, and the other from a different kind of Lutheran synod. The ELS Lutheran went up to the front of the church, lifted up his hands to Heaven, and said, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like those other Lutherans. Thank you that I stay faithful to the Word of God, that I cling to the Word of God, and that I see the Word of God as pure.’” “But the other Lutheran went into church and he would not even come up to the front. He struck his breast, put his head down and said, ‘God be merciful to me, a sinner.’” “I tell you, that man went to his home justified, rather than the other.”

All of us can fall into the sin of self-righteousness, where we think that we are better, and we can get to Heaven by what we do.

We don't get to Heaven that way.

There is only one way to be saved. And, once we have been struck by the Law and we despair of our own righteousness, it is only then that we are ready for the Gospel. We are ready to hear that Jesus is your Savior from sin.

Martin Luther had a friend by the last name of Spenlein. His friend, Spenlein, was a monk and he tried really hard to earn his way to

Heaven. The more he tried to earn his way to Heaven, by the Law, the more troubled he became. This young monk was in despair of getting to Heaven. So, Martin Luther wrote him a letter. It is kind of a famous letter. In this famous letter, he told Spenlein to despair of his own righteousness. He said, "Don't think that you can get to Heaven by keeping the Law." Then, he pointed Spenlein to the Gospel. In fact, if you go to Lakeside Lutheran High School, there is a rock out front, and that rock actually quotes part of this letter that Martin Luther wrote to Spenlein. I want to read this and to close with this, because it is such a beautiful teaching of the Gospel, that we get to Heaven only by the Gospel, only by what Jesus has done for us.

"Therefore my dear brother, learn Christ. Learn Christ crucified. Learn to sing praises to Him and to spare utterly of your own works. Say to Jesus, 'You are my righteousness. I am your sin.'"

"Say to Jesus, 'You have taken from me what is mine. You have taken my sin and you have given me what is yours. You have given me your holiness and forgiveness. You became what you were not. You became a sinner in my place. And, you made me what I was not. You made me righteous, by your death on the cross.'"

Luther said, "Beware of your ceaseless striving after righteousness so great that you no longer appear as a sinner in your own eyes, and don't want to be a sinner. Christ dwells only in sinners. Christ came down from Heaven, for the very purpose of dwelling in sinners. For we must achieve rest of conscious only through Christ, and only by what Christ did for us. Therefore, you are to find peace in Christ, despair of your own works, and know that Jesus has forgiven all of your sins."

Amen