



## Christ Lutheran Church

605 South Fifth Street • Norfolk, NE 68701

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Pastor Chip Winter, Director of Ministries

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### ***“The Law Gives A Grade, the Gospel – Grace.” – Romans 3:19-26***

*2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – June 18, 2017*

**Pastor Chip Winter**

Grace to you and Peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. The text for our sermon is the epistle appointed for the day and already read for us from St. Paul's letter to Rome.

My dear family in Christ, think back to your time in confirmation class. One of the first sessions that I usually teach in both confirmation class and religion instruction treats the two doctrines of the Bible that are most important: The Law and the Gospel. And in dealing with the Law we Lutherans have found it helpful to understand the Law – that doctrine of the Bible which tells me what I can and cannot do – as having three major purposes or three ways in which it is to be used.

One of the ways in which the Law is used is as a curb to evil and chaos in the world. Laws are put into place to keep people safe; to allow life to go on with a sense of order and justice. Road signs help you to know what to expect of other drivers as you are driving along, as well as helping them to know what to expect from you.

Another purpose of God's Law is to help believers know what is pleasing to our Heavenly Father. It is a guide telling us what are the right things to do in God's eyes. “Do not steal” teaches us that if something is not ours we are not to try to get it in a sneaky or deceptive way. Instead, as Dr.

Luther helps with us, God wants us to help our neighbor to keep what is his and to be honest in all financial matters. The Law curbs evil behavior in society and guides Christians in the way to obey God.

But the most important purpose of the Law is to show us our sins. Verse 20b **“...since through the law comes knowledge of sins.”** It shows us just how badly we have messed up in God’s eyes. It accuses us of doing wrong and convicts us when we fail to do what is right. Later in this same letter St. Paul bares his soul to the recipients, revealing how sin has made a mess of his own life. **“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me”** (7:19-20). What the great St. Paul admits we know to be true in our own lives, too. The Law shows us just how sinful we are.

Back to the seventh commandment: we are not to steal. Now most of us have not broken into someone’s home and taken their laptops or big screen television. We haven’t stolen a large amount of money from a store or a bank. But we’ve still broken this commandment, for it’s not just the truly awful things that count but also the little things. It’s easy to break this commandment and to do so regularly.

We steal by being lazy or doing sloppy work. In these ways, we steal time and productivity from our employers. Fudging the break time, surfing the internet, playing computer games or using the smart phone on company time. It’s all the same.

Another way to steal is by not being generous to others who are in need. 10% of our compensation is to be our offering to God but the other 90% of our funds are His, as well! Spending frivolously or compounding our debts on credit cards can leave us without the money when an opportunity arises to give to someone else in need – someone the Lord would have us help and aid.

How much food do we leave on our plates? How much do we end up throwing away out of the refrigerator? Wasting is another way of stealing as we fail to practice good stewardship of God's gifts in creation.

We could do this with each commandment. Big sins, little ones and those in-between, they all add up. **“For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Romans 3:22b-23a).

Let's look at it in this way (either object lesson or something on the screen). Notice what the Law does – it gives a grade. It tells us how we're doing – and it's not at all well. It shows us how badly we've fallen short. So, what's the grade? The minus sign. Think of life as a pass/fail course. You either get 100% and pass because you've never done anything that broke God's law. Or, you mess up and get a minus sign. You fail. Even if you've only done little sins. Because there is no distinction. And all of us have sinned and fallen short.

Now for the final bad news. Later in this letter St. Paul says this: for the wages of sin is death. Physical death. Eternal death. Separation from God forever. The horrifying future for every last one of us is hell and all its torment. God is angry at sin and He punished it with the sentence of death.

And that's where we would be left if it were not for reading through the Bible and learning of another teaching that trumps the Law's accusations. God is not only a God of justice and Law. He is a God of love and grace. This message – God's proper work that overcomes His alien work of judgment – is called the Gospel. The Gospel tells us what God has done for us and our salvation. The Gospel shows us Jesus.

Here is where a change gets to be made. When it comes to the Law the problem is the word “I”. I messed up. I sinned. I wasted my money. I didn't help someone in need. I failed God. I said

the wrong/evil thing. I lingered over something bad on my screen. I didn't worship God as I should have. I swore. I am the problem.

So, we need to get the word "I" out of the word Grade. You don't see the word "I" in Grade? It's there. It's the stem of the letter "d". Just cross out the up and down part of the "d" and it turns into a "c". Take out the "I" in Grade and you end up with...Grace. And what do you do with that "I" you just removed? You put it on the minus sign and turn it into a cross. Now you see the Gospel. The Gospel gives us grace because it gives us Jesus – who went to the cross to save us.

Listen to the second half of the text, again. **“For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith”** (Romans 3:22b-25a). **“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Romans 6:23). The Law shows us our sin and death. The Gospel shows us God's grace and life in Jesus.

Grace here can be thought of as **“God giving us what we do not deserve.”** That's as compared with Mercy – **“God Not giving us what we do deserve.”**

But here is another word to help us with both of those. It's the word we don't hear very often anymore – **Propitiation**. It has a couple of meanings: (1) It refers to how something turns God's anger away from us. It gets at how God's wrath is appeased and taken care of. (2) It also has the sense of sin being obliterated. Sin is somehow taken away and with it the punishment of death is removed. The (3) third way it is used is when it stands for the Mercy Seat. Grace = **“God giving us what we do not deserve.”** Mercy = **“God Not giving us what we do deserve.”**

The mercy seat was above the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple's Holy of Holies. The only day of the year that the Holy of Holies was not sealed off was on the Day of Atonement when

only the High Priest entered it. He would carry some of the blood of the sacrifices in order to sprinkle it upon the mercy seat. By the blood, symbolizing both the peoples' faith and the sacrifice God would one day make for all, the sins of the people would be forgiven – they would not receive the punishment they deserved. They received mercy.

Put that all together. Sin and punishment need to be obliterated in our lives. God's anger over our sin needs to be turned away from us. We need blood shed on a mercy seat for us. And when we turn a minus sign into a cross we see propitiation happen. Jesus' blood was shed for us. He turned God's anger away from us as it was fully vented upon Him. The punishment of our sins was placed on Jesus at the cross and so it was obliterated when He rose from the dead on Easter morning. We are now justified by God's grace because of Jesus and the suffering He endured for us. The Gospel gives both mercy and grace.

We can see that, the work of Law and Gospel, in the first line of Amazing Grace. Law – a wretch like me, lost, blind. Gospel – amazing Grace that saved, found, see.

Jesus turns a failing grade into grace. He turns God's anger away from us. He obliterates sin's punishment. The last words of Katie, Dr. Martin Luther's wife, upon her death bed were reported to be, "I will stick to Christ as a burr to a topcoat." The Gospel shows me Jesus, the Savior we need to stick to and truly, the Savior Who sticks with us. Amen.