Theology: Law

How to Listen to a Sermon
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You may not realize it, but you are a theologian every day of your life, as you seek to put your experience into some sort of framework and reconcile it with what you know about our relationship with God. Now you get to put this sermon into some theological boxes and see how it fits.

When God speaks and acts through his word, that word takes two primary forms: Law and Gospel. A strong sermon contains both. Occasionally a preacher might focus more strongly on one or the other, but over the Sundays of the year, both words of God should be heard. A weak sermon — or something that may be a talk but isn't really a sermon — might be full of religious talk, but never get around to Law or Gospel at all.

Let's look at both terms more closely.

The Law is what God commands us for the care and flourishing of his good creation. For example, that's why God gives Moses and the Israelites the Ten Commandments, beginning with "I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods!" Nobody can flourish, personally or socially, while serving a false god. And, serving the true God implies obedient regard for all his other creatures, too. Therefore, "You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal," and so forth (Exodus 20). Often in Scripture the Law is often accompanied by blessings for obedience and warnings for disobedience.

Jesus, the Son of God, is also a son of Israel. He knew the Ten Commandments, obeyed them himself, and expanded on their significance in the Sermon on the Mount. "You have heard it said…" In summary, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Or as he says in John's Gospel, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Here are some questions to keep in mind about how the Law is presented in a sermon.

First, is it *actually* God's Law, or some other kind of law—or example, policy advocated by a political group, good advice for living, local cultural standards, correct opinions, or

activities required to qualify as a “good Christian”? Preachers are often tempted to conflate their own, or their congregation or denomination’s, opinions with the eternal Law of God.

Second, even if something appears as a commandment from God, who is it addressed to? All human beings? Christian believers? One specific person? God commanded Joseph, “Do not fear to take Mary as your wife,” but that is not a generalizable principle.

Or, relatedly, is an example in the Bible being illegitimately turned into a universal law? The believers in Acts held everything in common, but there is no command of God to do so. Sometimes a preacher holds out an aspirational ideal as if it’s a divine law, which is misleading, and more often than not depressing.

In fact, sometimes preachers get so frustrated at their congregation’s lack of “progress” in aspirational ideals that their tone turns accusatory. How much airtime does the preacher devote to shaming and blaming the congregation? Is it principally preacher vs congregation, or does your preacher acknowledge failure and inadequacy before the true law of God, too?

Does your preacher wrestle honestly with the Law of God that is presented in Scripture, or pick and choose? Some preachers love to fixate on one area of the law, but tactically avoid others. Are you hearing the complete teaching of the Ten Commandments and Sermon on the Mount (among others)?

Finally, the most serious thing to look out for is preaching the law (God’s or any other law) as if your relationship to God and salvation *depend exclusively* on your obedience to it. Yes, the law is very good and very important for human flourishing. But you’ve probably begun to realize how rare and difficult it is to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect! What then?

The answer is: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9).

That’s why our next topic will be on the gospel in the sermon.