

**Sermon Text:** 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

**Occasion:** 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 13 Nov 2022

### **Working Out Law and Gospel**

Grace, mercy and peace be to you in the name of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

*<sup>7</sup> For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, <sup>8</sup> nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.... <sup>10</sup> For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.*

(2 Thess 3)

One of the blessings of the Lutheran Church is an emphasis of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. The Law tells us what should be done and the Gospel tells us what God has done already. By way of example we would say,

“We know the Lord has ordered His creation according to His command and created us to enjoy all He has made. We have failed to do as commanded and consequently deserve to be removed from God’s blessed creation. Yet God, out of His love for us, sent His only begotten Son to suffer the punishment for our sins and take away our guilt. Now that we have been cleansed by Christ, we may live in the goodness of God’s creation eternally.”

That was an example of properly distinguishing Law and Gospel. The Law shows what we should and how we have sinned. The Gospel shows how God has saved us from our sins. Confusions of Law and Gospel would include: we have to follow Jesus’ example in order to be saved or stay saved, that is, our good works are necessary for salvation. These ideas are bad because they confuse Law and Gospel—making it Lawspel, if you will. The truth of the matter is that Christ’s perfect life should be imitated but he has already paid the debt of your sins completely. Our good works are a necessary consequence of faith (James 2:22, 26; Rom 13:10), but they are not necessary for salvation. You were saved by Christ alone apart from works (Rom 5:8; Eph 2:8-10) and your salvation is always assured in Christ’s works, not your works.

When we get to passages like the one from 2 Thessalonians, we might be tempted to say we must labour for one another in order to live in Christ, but this would not be quite correct. In reality, we live in Christ therefore we desire to serve one another because Christ has served us. We should also imitate the disciples of Jesus in their service by not being a burden to anyone. This should be our goal but it is not why we are saved. We were saved at the cross of Jesus Christ, not when we set up tables for a church potluck. Only by the love of Christ may we stand forgiven and renewed so that we may love one another with a true heart (cf. Heb 11:22). Now, this love of

Christ might lead you to set up tables and prepare potato salad for a potluck, but these good works are not necessary for salvation. We are not saved by anything we have done or can do. Salvation comes only from the love of God shown through Christ at the cross. And God commands that we love one another as Christ has loved us and this love only comes to us through the cross. Therefore, while works of love are necessary when you are in Christ through faith, Christ alone is necessary for salvation.

We need to keep this in mind when we are declaring things like: do not be a burden to anyone and only eat the daily bread for which you laboured (2 Thess 3:8). We cannot think of this as meaning that we have to work out everything ourselves, setting our needs aside so we never request help but only offer help. It won't work. If no one wants help, then there would be no one to offer help to. The Church is about people broken in sin coming together to be healed by Christ and the Lord using the Church to support those who need care. We should not be a burden by making unnecessary demands while also recognizing that every single one of us needs help and prayerful support. The Church is us coming together as the body of Christ to receive the forgiveness which comes from the body and blood of Christ. Good works are necessary to help our neighbours, but Christ alone is necessary for salvation.

It is through Christ's body sacrificed on the cross that we have been cleansed of sin. It is through Christ's bodily resurrection that we have passed from death to life. These are the works of Christ for us that we cannot hope to imitate; and that's fine. The work the Lord has put before us to do is using the hope and love we find in the death and resurrection of Christ toward service to one another. Even though we are united to the body of Christ, and are known as the body of Christ which is the Church, we can admit we are not able to act perfectly like Christ. We have failed to be perfect before God and before our neighbours. Therefore, we need our neighbours' patience, help, and regularly we need their forgiveness. But most of all, we need Christ making as all one in the promise of salvation to enliven us to care for one another. Out of love and grace, we ought not to be a burden to anyone. We know we are burdensome—that we cannot do everything we must—but this is why God urges all of us to help others. As individuals within the body of the Church, we recognize that we are unable to do some things but that God has equipped us to do other things.

If you are unable to do some labour in the Church, you can let that be covered those with time, energy, and good backs. Instead, you can help out with administration in the congregation or spend time doing one of the many smaller tasks that always need doing. Even if you are even unable to do the small things, perhaps you are too infirm, you can still care for your neighbours and caregivers by praying for them and sharing the encouraging word of the Gospel. We are all members of the body of Christ, working to build each other up because of what Christ's body and blood have done for us.

Through the offering up of his body at the cross, Christ has won for us salvation. There is no work greater than that which Christ did at the cross and there is no work we should look to for salvation but Christ's alone. Where we have failed, Christ has triumphed. He has been tempted

as we are yet he is without sin (Heb 4:15). And Christ's body we eat in the bread of holy communion and the blood we drink in the wine is a reception of the sacrifice of Christ at the cross. The meal of holy communion unites us with Christ, his saving grace, and with the entire body of Christ—the Church. So, to have our weaknesses and shortcomings forgiven, we go to the body of Christ in communion where the entire body of Christ as the Church goes for forgiveness. At the table of our Lord, we are in God's grace.

But we should also keep in mind the command Paul gave in 2 Thessalonians (3:10): If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. The meal of holy communion is not only meant to unite us with Christ, cleanse us from sin, and participate in eternity. Reception of the body of Christ is meant to encourage us to do better. We have sinned and need forgiveness. And we receive forgiveness in the meal of holy communion. And once forgiven, we are to live properly as Christians by doing the good works God has prepared for us to do. This is a proper distinction of Law and Gospel. Nothing you do will make you worthy of God's grace given in Word and Sacrament. His grace comes to you freely to purify you from all sin. And if you are now made holy as God is holy, then you are to live as God commands you to live.

This is why we must examine ourselves in preparation for holy communion. We are to see our need for forgiveness, have faith that the body and blood of Christ is present on the altar for our forgiveness, and live in the body of Christ—the Church—by seeking to love one another as God directs (cf. 1 Cor 11:27-34).<sup>1</sup> If you are unwilling to work for your brothers and sisters in Christ, you should examine yourself before eating the body of Christ. Unwillingness to love the people who are the body of Christ creates a spiritual division between you and the holy body and blood of Jesus in the communion meal. But, if we are making a proper distinction of Law and Gospel, we must say that this separation between you and Christ's body does not cut you off forever. Rather, lacking the willingness to act according to the love of the Gospel is another sin for which you must be forgiven, and that sin can be forgiven by confessing it at the table of the Lord who helps us to turn from sin.

We are not saved by our good works, although our works must flow from faith as part of our union with Christ. Your hope of salvation is founded on nothing less than Jesus Christ as your righteousness. We cannot confuse these things as if good works get you into heaven or stave off hell. They are the result of a life of faith in which we constantly receive the love and grace of Jesus. If you are having trouble doing the good works the Lord has asked, and you fear you may be burdensome to others, first look to Christ. Know that you are forgiven and renewed. Take heart in the forgiveness he has shown you and know forgiveness awaits all penitent hearts. Good works flow from God's love shown to you. If you find labouring for others hard, then return to where Christ shows you his love: his Word, his Sacrament, and his Church where these things reside. Amen.

The peace that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Also read "Christian Questions and Their Answers" in Luther's Small Catechism, especially question 18.