

# 500 Years After Luther, We Still Feel the Pressure to Be Justified

Luther's law/gospel insight is as brilliant as ever—especially in 21st century America.

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laymobil, the German toy company, made

unexpected headlines in 2015 when it released a limited edition Martin Luther figurine. Outside of how smiley it cast the cantankerous theologian, the toy itself wasn't especially newsworthy. What got everyone's attention was how quickly it flew off the shelves. Overnight little Luther became the fastest-selling item in the company's 40-year history. While factories scrambled to catch up with demand, consumers descended on eBay in search of what they knew was the perfect gift for the pastor in their lives. At least, the ones with a sense of humor.

In retrospect, irony might have been the better word. It was not the first time Luther had been at the center of a collision

between demand, expectation, and gift. Thankfully, the stakes were quite a bit lower this time around. The same cannot be said for those raised by his theology.

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A few years ago, in response to a spate of suicides on its campus, the University of Pennsylvania put together a task force to explore the mental health of its students. What they found was tragic, but sadly unsurprising. “The pressures engendered by the perception that one has to be perfect in every academic, co-curricular, and social endeavor can lead to stress and in some cases distress,” the task force’s report said. “[I]n turn, [distress] can manifest as demoralization, alienation, or conditions like anxiety or depression. For some students, mental illness can lead to suicide.”

The mercilessness described here hints at a tragic escalation of a phenomenon experienced not just by college students, but by everyone today—the pressure to perform, to make something of oneself, to become acceptable, to make a difference in the world, to justify one’s existence. It’s a phenomenon that cannot help but reinvigorate narcissism. It throws us back on ourselves, and when we falter in some irreversible way, we inevitably view self-harm as an option. Some wonder on this 500th anniversary whether the Reformation that Luther started is essentially over. That is,

don't we get the message already? Aren't we all on the same page when it comes to salvation by grace through faith? The short answer appears to be no.

## Breakthrough

Picture, if you can, an earnest-looking monk in his mid-30s, sequestered in one of the small rooms in the tower of his cloister. He is hard at work on a fresh set of lectures for the university where he serves as a professor of theology. The work isn't going well. He has hit a roadblock in his studies that will not yield, a passage in the first chapter of Romans. The 17th verse specifically has been keeping him up at night: "For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"

Like those around him, Martin Luther had been trained in the medieval scholastic tradition, which interpreted Paul's phrase "the righteousness of God" as shorthand for the awesome holiness of God, before which sinners can only quail in fear. He would have read the verse in Romans roughly as, "The gospel reveals that God punishes sinners," which, of course, is no gospel at all. The prospect both terrified and consumed him.

Brother Martin, you see, possessed what might politely be called an overactive conscience. Today he'd likely be termed a neurotic or "a real handful." Whatever the root of his sensitivities, they had already driven him into a monastery, where he hoped a life of radical service might bring him the peace with God he craved.

In the monastery he became notorious for spending countless hours in the confessional, trying to get right with God by unearthing every dark thought and impure motive in his heart. Yet he found no comfort. The deeper he dove into the system of

confession and penance, the deeper his despair at pleasing God became. As he would later admit, he had begun to hate a God who, he felt, demanded the impossible—who clobbered sinners mercilessly with his law, only to clobber them afresh with his gospel, too.

This particular day was different. Agonizing over the verse once again, he received a lightning bolt of inspiration. This is how he described it: “I grasped that the righteousness of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.”

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A long hoped-for assurance washed over the fretful young man, and according to every account, his faltering love for God burst back into flame. The discovery, Luther explained elsewhere, was premised on distinguishing between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of the gospel, or that which can be earned by man and that which is given by God. Years later, Luther told his friends that prior to the day in question, “I regarded both [God’s law and his gospel] as the same thing and held that there was no difference between Christ and Moses except the times in which they lived and their degrees of perfection. When I realized the law was one thing, and the gospel another, I broke through and was free.”

As self-evident as this distinction between the law that convicts

and the gospel that frees may sound today, its importance cannot be overstated—not then and not now. It represents the key by which Luther unlocked the central teaching of the Christian faith, indeed of Christ himself, which is the forgiveness of sins and justification of the sinner by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Moreover, it was the spark that ignited the Reformation for which countless Europeans would give their lives.

## Radical distinction in an undivided Word

As the years went by, the distinction between the law and the gospel grew in prominence in Luther's thinking, receiving its fullest and most radical treatment in his *Commentary on Galatians* (1535). In that work he goes so far as to say, "The distinction between law and gospel is the highest art in Christendom. . . . Virtually the whole of the Scriptures and the understanding of the whole of theology depends upon the true understanding of the law and the gospel." Strong words. Cut to today. The distinction between law and gospel has gone in and out of fashion during the 500 years since Luther first popularized it. Despite the anniversary at hand, its esteem in the eyes of theologians and pastors currently lies at what many would consider an all-time low, often caricatured as reductive and outmoded, at best a theological curiosity, at worst a tight-fisted attempt to force a framework on the Bible that is alien to it.

To be clear, the law and gospel hermeneutic has proved no more immune to abuse than any other great theological concept. Proponents have sometimes mistakenly given the impression that it divides the Bible in half (equating the Old Testament with law and the New Testament with gospel), or that it dismisses whole books and chapters as strictly one or the other, in effect shackling the text (and the One to whom the

text refers).

Nothing could be further from the truth. The law and gospel distinction is less about imposing a doctrinal straightjacket on the Bible text than about engaging a living God. If anything, reading the Bible through the lens of law and gospel safeguards the Word from being read predominantly as an instruction manual rather than as a living instrument of the Spirit that proclaims God's work in the world on behalf of sinners in need of saving.

Indeed, the distinction between law and gospel is a powerful explanation of how the Bible doesn't just sit there; it reaches out and grasps us, shakes us, transforms us, frees us—it kills us and makes us alive. Even so, Luther himself warned against what he saw as a propensity for turning such a hermeneutic into a new law, just another tool for sinners to try to establish control over Scripture.

“There is no man living on earth who knows how to distinguish rightly between the law and the gospel,” he wrote. “We may think we understand it when we are listening to a sermon, but we're far from it. *Only the Holy Spirit knows this art*” (emphasis added).

**The law tells us what we ought to do; the gospel tells us what God has done. The law shows us that we need to be forgiven; the gospel announces that we have been forgiven.**

For those willing to look beneath the surface of what the 2017 anniversary is celebrating, the vitality of this distinction remains undiminished. It has an immense capacity for

breathing new life into a faith that can all too easily sink into complacency or exhaustion.

In fact, despite its association with a specific historical moment, no approach to the Bible could be less esoteric. Those who have experienced the difference between control and surrender, criticism and acceptance, hurt and forgiveness, achievement and appeasement, the failure to love and the desire to be loved—that is, everyone—will not have a hard time grasping this distinction. It lies at the heart, not just of Scripture, but of everyday life.

So what exactly is this distinction and why is it so important?

## The Law

At the risk of oversimplification, Luther believed that God has spoken to human beings and continues to speak to them in two words: *law* and *gospel*. These words are distinct from one another but not independent.

The basic demarcation is straightforward: The law tells us what we *ought* to do; the gospel tells us what God has *done*. The law shows us that we *need* to be forgiven; the gospel announces that we *have* been forgiven. The law paves the way for the gospel by revealing our plight, and the gospel proclaims the good news to those struck down by the law. But there's more to it than that.

What most of us think of when we think of “the law” in religious terms is the capital-L Law of God, the Oughts and Ought Nots that we find spelled out in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. We think of the great commands of God: Don't steal, don't murder, don't worship idols, love God with all your heart. This Law, the capital-L Law, traces the shape of true holiness. And in doing so it reveals us to be an obstinate people, fundamentally turned away from the right choices, the proper feelings, the good life, and from God himself. Ultimately, the Law brings humankind face to face

with its mortality, for it reveals our sin and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23, KJV).

But Luther, inspired by Paul’s epistles, recognized that the law also referred to a kind of overarching spiritual principle of life in the world. It is an elemental force that we all experience every hour of every day, present whenever we experience accusation and constraint and control and condemnation—which we are all constantly relying upon to justify ourselves. This means that the law is at work on us even when we aren’t actually hearing specific divine commands. This means that it isn’t so much what the law *says* that causes us to lie awake at night; it is how we *hear it*.

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A good illustration can be found in a classic Calvin and Hobbes comic strip where Hobbes the tiger asks his friend Calvin if he’s planning to make any New Year’s resolutions. Calvin responds, “Resolutions? *Me??* Just what are you implying? That I need to *change??* Well, Buddy, as far as *I’m* concerned, I’m perfect the way I *am!*”

Although Hobbes has asked a simple question, Calvin hears an accusation: “Your personality could use some work.” The irony in the strip is that Calvin’s reaction reveals just how much he is in need of improvement. The condemnation is apt.

Language like “if/then” often signals the law’s presence: If you

obey our rules, then you get dessert. But the law cannot be boiled down to a grammatical formula. Depending on context, what one person hears as prohibition another hears as permission. Take, for example, “If you see him again, you will be in trouble.” Said to a teenager about her boyfriend, it’s likely to sound like an unfair ban; spoken to a codependent woman who can’t break free of an abusive man, it might sound like grace and freedom.

Luther said that the law is “a constant guest” in our conscience. You might say that the little-l law is the air we breathe as human beings, the default setting, the *quid pro quo* that characterizes our internal life and much of our external one as well. Its underlying logic is embarrassingly familiar: To get approval, you have to achieve. Behavior precedes belovedness. Climb the ladder, or else. No wonder Hebrews tells us that the law is inscribed on the mind (Heb. 8:10).

We see the divine demand upon humankind being reflected concretely in the countless demands we devise for ourselves, religious or not, what we might call little-l law. The woman on the street may not have given the fifth chapter of Matthew’s gospel a second thought since Sunday school, yet she is likely on intimate terms with the condemning echoes issuing from Madison Avenue (“Thou shalt be skinny, successful, independent, and self-actualized”). She has long since grown accustomed to the internalized voice of a demanding parent, that feeling of never being quite enough which drives so much of her striving and exhaustion. She is, you might say, just like you and me.

In this light, it is perhaps odd that the “secular” world is often viewed as an escape from the oppressive moral strictures of religion. But the secular world can be just as condemning and judgmental as the religious one, if not more so. “Thou shalt be authentic,” for example, turns out to be a crueler taskmaster

than “Thou shalt not bear false witness.” The latter at least has the benefit of not being a moving target, constantly changing with the cultural wind. When wedded to an overly optimistic view of human nature—the delusion that we *can actually* live up to the secular world’s shifting standards—the result can be crazy-making.

Take busyness for example. When asked how we are doing, we used to say, “Fine” or “Well.” Today, as a number of commentators have noted, the default response is “Busy.” And we’re not lying. Smartphones and similar devices have largely chased away the uncomfortable idleness that once characterized society, quickening the pace of life to an almost absurd degree.

But busyness is more than a description of how we’re doing; it is one of our culture’s predominant indicators of worth and value, a measure of personal righteousness. The more frantic the activity, the better. The implication is that if we’re not over-occupied, we are inferior to those who are. As with all law-based barometers of self-worth (beauty, wealth, influence, youth, etc.), there is no *enough*.

What the near-universal obsession with busyness reveals is that *everyone* is religious—including the “secular” world, which is why I put *secular* in quotes—not just those who believe in God or go to church. Works righteousness—the attempt to justify yourself by works of the law (be they actions or attributes)—is the default mode of *human* operation, not just of the select few who identify as religious. The law reigns over all creation; the question is not *if*, but *which* form a person subscribes to. As Bob Dylan so memorably put it, “You’re gonna have to serve somebody.”

Whatever its form, the law is never able to bring about what it calls for. Much as we might wish it were not the case, telling people what they *should* do does not give them—or us—the power to do it. In fact, the law tends to create the very thing it

seeks to avoid. Banning a book is often a triumph for its marketing. Suggesting a friend “just relax” compounds their stress. The law increases the trespass (Rom. 5:20).

The world of social media often seems tailor-made for illustrations of both how the Law of Who You Must Be manifests itself *and* how counterproductive those manifestations can be. We edit our personalities and lives online in order to get the hoped-for response from others—affirmation and attention. Yet if and when that response actually comes, it feels hollow. No surprise that social scientists tell us that the more time we spend on social media, the happier we perceive our friends to be, and the sadder we feel as a consequence.

Of course, we love the law because it promises us agency—it puts the keys to our wellbeing in our own hands. If I can just do *x, y, or z*, then I will get the result I want. If I can just be a certain kind of person, or project those qualities publicly, then I will be loved. People who are addicted to control—which is all of us—are addicted to the law as a means of control. The sad irony of our lives is that our desire to be in control almost always ends up controlling us. You might say that our relationship to the law is a fatal attraction, albeit one that makes sense of an alarming amount of our behavior.

The problem, of course, is that no one follows the law perfectly—not the little-l laws of society and certainly not the capital-L Law of God (see the rich young ruler, Mark 10:17–22). How else to account for the fact that the most accomplished people feel *more*, rather than less, pressure to succeed? Ask the most high-achieving person you know about their life, and you’ll invariably hear some form of frustration over the truth that the higher you climb, the longer the ladder gets. There is a double-bind at work. Like a husband pointing out the dishes he’s done in order to leverage some gratitude from his wife, the second we harness our good deeds for credit

is the second they become less good.

## **Grace runs directly counter to a culture where technology has made our every misstep or lapse in judgment searchable and permanent.**

Not surprisingly, relationships characterized primarily by law often bite the dust. In their book *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me)*, social psychologists Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson describe how a fixation on righteousness can choke the life out of love.

“The vast majority of couples who drift apart do so slowly, over time, in a snowballing pattern of blame and self-justification,” they write. “Each partner focuses on what the other one is doing wrong, while justifying his or her own preferences, attitudes, and ways of doing things. . . . From our standpoint, therefore, misunderstandings, conflicts, personality differences, and even angry quarrels are not the assassins of love; self-justification is.”

## **The Gospel**

The second word, *gospel*, means *good news*. News is not command. Command comes in the imperative voice—“Do this”—and news in the indicative voice—“This has been done.” For Christians, of course, the good news is Jesus Christ, who died and rose again, taking the whole of God’s wrath upon himself and setting us free. The gospel announces that on account of Christ’s death and resurrection, we are justified by grace through faith: not by what we do, or even by who we are, but by what Christ has done and who he is. Our guilt has been atoned for and the deepest judgment satisfied, opening up the

reconciliation of sinners with a holy God and life eternal. “For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Rom. 5:10). While the law is conditional—a two-way street—the gift of Christ is unconditional. Like all true gifts, it arrives unbidden—a great and glorious surprise for those who don’t deserve one. His affection cannot be leveraged or merited. It is a gift with no strings attached. Jesus simply gave—his attention, his power, his very self—and to the wrong people. In the Cross, the all-encompassing love of God speaks louder than his voice of condemnation.

Much like capital-L and little-l forms of law, there exists a corollary between the capital-G Gospel of Jesus Christ and little-g grace in human affairs. We see this borne out in our own lives and those of other people: When it comes to lifting the human spirit, nothing is more potent than love in the midst of deserved judgment. Grace proves, time and again, to be the force that inspires service and creativity and hope and vulnerability and new life. Biblical figures like Zacchaeus and Gomer, fictional ones like Jean Valjean and Ebenezer Scrooge, and historical figures like John Newton, Corrie ten Boom, and Martin Luther King Jr. testify to this most hopeful of realities.

A grace-centered view of the world takes for granted that we are all severely handicapped in our ability to love one another, and that we stand a better chance of loving our neighbor (or spouse) when we aren’t looking to them to do or be what they cannot do or be. Christian hope, therefore, lies in not having to generate love on our own steam but in prior belovedness, expressed in sacrificial terms and in spite of our being undeserving. This kind of love, which is by definition divine, seeks out the unlovable and finds before it is found. It satisfies rather than introduces expectations. If the law commands that

we love perfectly, the gospel announces that we are perfectly loved.

Moreover, grace runs directly counter to a culture where technology has made our every misstep or lapse in judgment searchable and permanent. You don't have to be an ex-con to find yourself beholden to a rap-sheet long after the sentence has been served, the debt paid. Even preteens know that your infractions are out there for anyone with an Internet connection to find. A friend once described the Internet as "just like the real world, with all the forgiveness vacuumed out." Politicians talk of "the right to be forgotten" and wonder if it could ever be possible among a scorekeeping species. The bad news is that it isn't. The good news is that what is impossible with man is possible with God.

Ultimately, law and gospel go a long way toward making sense of our anxieties and hopes. If the world is truly as merciless a place as it appears, then Christians do not have to work very hard to make the notion of justification by faith—of unassailable righteousness received as a gift independent of merit—sound appealing. To ears habituated to the deafening rhythm of imperative and demand and "never enough," the melody of absolution sounds all the sweeter. Maybe even like the difference between life and death.

In a life governed by the law, the fear of defeat and threat of scarcity looms over every endeavor. In a life governed by the gospel, *nothing that needs to be done hasn't already been done*. In the realm of the law, we must keep face. In the realm of the gospel, we can laugh at ourselves. In the realm of the law, we must tediously craft emails with the right balance of seriousness and brevity. In the realm of the gospel, we can risk being vulnerable without fear of what trouble or embarrassment our words might bring. While the law incites us to point our fingers at others in blame, the gospel invites us to return the pointing finger back to our chest.

One of Martin Luther's very first and most memorable expressions of his great discovery came in thesis 26 of The Heidelberg Disputation (1518). He wrote, "The law says, 'Do this,' and it is never done. Grace says, 'Believe in this,' and everything is already done." The pressure to self-justify has been removed, and it has been replaced with freedom: the freedom to die and yet to live, to fail and yet succeed. The freedom to love, to serve, to wait, to laugh, to cry, to sit idle, to get busy—yes, even to play.

Ideally with limited edition German toys.

*David Zahl is the executive director of Mockingbird Ministries (mbird.com) and co-author of Law and Gospel: A Theology for Sinners (and Saints).*