

Using Law-Gospel Pairs in Preaching

By Gary A. Griep

[The writer is a Pennsylvania pastor concerned about his sermonizing. He shares his concerns with his colleagues in the ministry.]

The goal of our preaching will always be the same. We are to confront people with their sins and then introduce them to the Savior who has removed those sins. But while the goal will always be the same, God has provided us with a variety of roads to follow in reaching that goal. God has provided a number of law-gospel pairs in the Bible which express the same basic truth but present it in a variety of ways. This study offers over 50 different frameworks for presenting the law and the gospel. These law-gospel pairs come directly from the Scriptures. This is not an exhaustive list but it will include the majority of the Bible's law-gospel pairs. In his *Preaching for the Church*, Richard Caemmerer presents similar material (pp 21–32), especially in the section treating “complexes” of the gospel.

I. The Need to Use God's Variety

As pastors, we do well to use God's variety in presenting law and gospel. We run the danger of becoming stuck in the rut of presenting law and gospel in the same way every Sunday. We may like a certain law-gospel pair and use it until it becomes monotonous in our sermons. This can lead only to frustration for hearers and the preacher.

Soon, our presentation of the gospel becomes frustrating to us. Sunday after Sunday, we seem to see our members tune us out when we begin to mention the cross and the suffering and death of Jesus. What should be the climax of our sermon often becomes the nadir. Not only do we become discouraged, but we can even be misled into thinking that our members are receiving the gospel in vain and are ungrateful to God.

This frustration may also lead us to underrate the preaching of law and gospel. Instead of making law-gospel the center of our sermon, we are tempted to remove it from its rightful place in our message and begin to locate it in places where it can be “conveniently squeezed in.” We yield to other material the central place in our messages.

In addition to our own frustration, our members could become frustrated by the monotony of our gospel presentations. They could resist the monotony of the presentation by tuning out, not the gospel message, but only the sameness with which we present it each Sunday.

There is no reason why we have to be monotonous in our presentation of law and gospel when God has given us such rich variety. Any frustration by our members and ourselves can be avoided by a careful use of law-gospel pairs in the Scriptures. We will still be arriving at the same destination each Sunday, but the road we follow and lead our people along will vary from Sunday to Sunday. Both pastor and members will appreciate a careful use of law-gospel pairs.

II. God's Variety in Presenting Law-Gospel

God uses comparisons from all facets of life to show us our sin and then our Savior. These comparisons can be grouped into four different categories: Physical Comparisons, Legal Comparisons, Behavioral Comparisons and Comparisons from Nature.

Here is an example of a law-gospel pairing:

Dark-Light: The law convinces us we are in the *dark*. The gospel reassures us we are in the *light*.

CATEGORY 1: Physical Comparisons

1. Sick-Healthy
2. Dead-Alive
3. Blind-Seeing
4. Deaf-Hearing
5. Leprous-Cleansed
6. Thirsty-Refreshed
7. Hungry-Filled
8. Paralyzed-Free to move
9. Demon Possessed-God Possessed
10. Crippled-Whole
11. Filthy-Clean
12. Bitter-Sweet

CATEGORY 2: Legal Comparisons

13. Miss the mark (sins)-Scored bullseye (perfect)
14. Enemies-Friends
15. Criminals-Pardoned
16. Killers-Amnesty
17. Prisoners-Release
18. Convicts-Ex-cons
19. Unrighteous-God's righteousness
20. Self-righteous-God's righteousness
21. Slaves-Children
22. Slaves to sin-Slaves to God
23. Debtors-Forgiven
24. Guilty-Innocent
25. Law-breakers-Law-keepers
26. Foreigners-Citizens
27. Judges-Acquitted
28. Sinners-Saints

29. Evil-Good
30. Book of Life: no entry-Name in Book of Life
31. Kidnapped-Ransomed

CATEGORY 3: Behavioral Comparisons*Those Involving Man*

32. Sad-Joyous
33. Despair-Hope
34. Insecure-Security
35. Fearful-Confident
36. Terrified-Comforted
37. Troubled-At ease
38. Ignorant-Wise, knowing
39. Insensitive-Loving

Those Involving God

40. Fury-Mercy
41. Hate-Love
42. Angry-Reconciled

CATEGORY 4: Comparisons from Nature

43. Dark-Light
44. Far away-Near
45. Lost-Found
46. Separation-Atonement
47. Unprotected-Sheltered
48. On road to hell-On road to heaven
49. Exposed to death-Shielded from death
50. Our sins are recorded in God's handwriting-
Handwriting blotted out
51. Bad news-Good news

III. Concrete Examples of Law-Gospel Pairs in Scripture

The next thing to be done in sermon study is to determine which law-gospel pair can best be used with the text. Most texts indicate the pairing clearly and directly. But there are also texts where the pairing is not clearly indicated. This gives an opportunity to use a law-gospel pairing which is rarely used during the course of a year of preaching.

If we favor sticking to a different law-gospel pair in each sermon and drive that one pair home, then we safeguard ourselves from monotony and will not repeat that same pairing for a year. The pairings alone give us almost a year's worth of variety in preaching law and gospel.

But suppose that we run across texts that use the same pairing within a few weeks of each other in our pericope preaching. This can happen fairly often. That may be the time to replace an explanation of the pairing with a concrete example from Scripture.

Suppose that we used the law-gospel pairing, unprotected-sheltered, on one Sunday. We may have explained how the law convinces us that we are unprotected from God's destruction because of our sins. Then we will have explained that Jesus removed those sins and thus shelters us from the destruction of God. We don't want to repeat that idea in the same words within a few weeks. So we turn to the Bible and look for concrete examples of this pairing which will form the climax and center of our message. For the unsheltered-protected

pairing we may turn to the concrete example of Lot and his wife. We may note how Lot and his wife were unprotected from God's destruction while they lived in Sodom and Gomorrah and how God provided them a place of shelter.

The use of concrete examples gives further variation and provides a way to bring across law and gospel in an easy-to-understand way. What can be usefully done is to make a listing of the law-gospel pairs and next to each pair, a listing of concrete examples. This provides a wealth of variety and affords an opportunity to bring into the sermon little-used examples from the Bible.

IV. Further Variations on Law-Gospel Pairs

Once we have a firm grip on the law-gospel pairings and we see how these pairings are presented to us in concrete Bible examples, then we may begin to look for further variation in the use of the pairs. The possibilities for variety are limitless if we begin to look for examples and comparisons from nature, family, school, business, church and other areas which bring out some facet of a law-gospel pairing.

For instance, one could employ this law-gospel pairing, God's anger-God's peace. In a sermon at a District Conference, in which the speaker based his messages on this pairing, he took an example from nature to express this pairing in a refreshingly different way. He spoke of Christ as a lightning rod who would collect all of God's lightning (anger) to himself. This was based on the anger-peace pairing but was such a vivid comparison that it really struck home. Lightning is a common symbol from nature for God's anger and the lightning rod is a common symbol for protection from lightning or protection from God's anger. This is just one example from nature which can make a tremendous difference in our presentation of law and gospel. Nature provides an abundance of comparisons and examples.

The family is also a rich source of examples. It can profitably be utilized, for example, in the anger-peace pairing. What pictures can be found in the family to bring this pairing across in a vivid way? What is the symbol for anger in our family? Is it the belt or the spanking or the silent treatment or the restriction of activities? What is the symbol that pictures the family at peace? Is it Dad's lap or Mom's waiting arms? These symbols and examples from family life can be used in a sermon to cast in a novel light what our relationship to God is all about. Imagine what a child would be thinking if he knew that God would whip him for his sins or give him the silent treatment if it weren't for Jesus and the peace with God that Jesus brings. The possibilities for variation in presenting law and gospel are almost limitless, once we begin to utilize the pairings.

Since the proclamation of law and gospel is our most important task, we want that proclamation to strike home in the hearts of our members. We will consequently give careful study to the scriptural pairings of law and gospel and seek to use God's variety faithfully.