

# Applying the Scripture's Uniqueness in the Ministry of Preaching

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I speak to you from a very definite set of presuppositions. It could hardly be otherwise for a Lutheran pastor who is asked to explicate how he applies the marvelous uniqueness of the Holy Scripture in his work of preaching. The presuppositions that underlie the presentation you're about to hear have been spelled out in the vow Lutheran pastors take on the day of their ordination. There we pledged loyalty to the Scripture and to the Lutheran Confessions. When I defend the thesis, therefore, that in the preaching ministry the Scriptures are absolutely unique I will be speaking about preaching *as defined by the Lutheran Confessions*. The Formula of Concord, e.g., affirms that the *distinction between Law and Gospel* is the "especially brilliant light" (Ep. V) by which the divine message and the divine intent of the Scripture become clear to us. Every time you and I step into a pulpit to address the people of God we will need to remember that we and the people we serve are not saved *by the Law*. Neither are they and we saved *by the Gospel*. They and we are saved only *by Law and Gospel*, one sword with two sharp edges.

Only preaching which is centered in Law and Gospel can meet the sinner's deepest needs. Augustine spoke for every human being when he wrote: "Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you. Until I have heard the message of Law and Gospel I cannot be sure of *where I stand with God*. Until I have heard the thunder of God's Law and the sweet song of his Gospel I am not able to *make sense out of life*, and I surely am not ready to *face the day of my death*."

Respecting the uniqueness of the Scripture in our preaching begins, therefore, when we *distinguish these two doctrines from one another*. That's the easy part of our assignment. (I'm sure many of you will have shared my feelings when, as a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, I felt I had mastered the distinction between Law and Gospel). Orthodox Lutheran preaching, however, shows its respect for the uniqueness of the Scripture also as it *properly relates these doctrines to one another*. And that isn't nearly as easy as keeping them apart. You'll remember that Luther said the person who can do that deserves the doctor's title. But only when a preacher does that can he claim to be applying the Scripture's uniqueness to his ministry of preaching.

What is the unique message of the Scripture *regarding God's Law* which God wants his messengers to share with his people? Every time I begin to study a preaching text I must ask myself: "Where does this text *make me tremble*?" The answer will not be hard to find. Implicit in everything God has to say to us in the Scripture is the fact that God designed us *for himself*. The chairman of the board of the universe never intended us to live as independent creatures.

Our world believes that man is an animal, the product of endless cycles of struggle up from the slime. The Bible teaches that you and I were originally designed to live under God in a Lord and servant relationship. "These are my people," God says, "the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise" (Is 43:21). "They are the work of my hands, for the display of my splendor" (Is 60:21). Here, I submit, is square one for preaching God's Law explicitly.

Square two. God *demands perfection* in those who will live with him. He is perfect, and he will be satisfied with no less in the members of his family. "Without holiness no one will see

the Lord,” the apostle reminds us (He 12:14). Back to our study of next Sunday’s sermon text. Where does that text make me tremble? I have failed to give God the perfect obedience he demands. I have thrown in his face the disobedience he forbids. I have dared to argue with my Creator. Worse yet, I am a person for whom this sort of thing comes naturally. And worst of all, with this admission I place myself under God’s judgment.

According to the Lutheran Confessions, the primary purpose of God’s Law is to expose sin. “The chief function or force of the Law is to reveal original sin with all its fruits, and to show man how very low his nature has fallen,” Luther wrote in the Smalcald Articles (III, II: 4). Preachers often make the mistake of not going deep enough in diagnosing the sinner’s malady. When analyzing the human predicament, it’s a mistake to focus only on obvious transgressions of the Second Table. God’s big problem with us is not that we’re proud, or that we drink too much, or that we cheat on our wives or on Form 1040. Those are *symptoms* of sin, just as a fever is a symptom of an infection in the body.

Stealing is not primarily an offense against the person whose property I have taken. Stealing is telling God: “You’re not taking care of me, and so I’m going to have to take matters into my own hands.” Sins against our fellow human beings are invariably rooted in our failure to fear and love and trust God as he alone is to be feared, loved, and trusted.

Applying the Scripture’s uniqueness in our ministry of preaching means, first of all, refusing to mute or to muffle the thunder of God’s holy Law. Christian people, no less than heathen people, need to hear that God demands a perfect heart, a heart that is in tune with God’s will, a heart that instinctively loves what pleases God and hates what is evil. They need to hear that God is in terrible earnest about the demands of his Law. Coupled with his absolute *demand* is his absolute *curse* over the person, over every person who does not give God what the Law demands.

How easy it is for the preacher to mask the uniqueness of the Scripture by forcing God’s Law to conform to the canons of human logic or to human standards of fairness! How appealing it is to our old Adam when we view God’s Law as little more than common-sense suggestions which will make our life easier and our contacts with people more pleasant. How easy it is for a preacher, especially if he loves people and doesn’t like to hurt them, to blunt the cutting edge of God’s Law with statements like: “Now to be sure, God hates sin, but don’t forget: he loves the sinner.” How utterly misleading! On Judgment Day is God going to send *sin* to hell, or *sinner*?

Listen to the voices of three of God’s Old Testament spokesmen, and learn from them how to respect the uniqueness of the divine revelation by preaching God’s Law explicitly.

You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil;  
with you the wicked cannot dwell.  
The arrogant cannot stand in your presence;  
you hate all who do wrong.  
(David, in Psalm 5:4-5).

Three centuries later God bared his heart — and tipped his hand — about the sin of the covenant nation of Israel:

Because of all their wickedness in Gilgal,  
I hated them there.  
Because of their sinful deeds,

I will drive them out of my house.  
I will no longer love them.  
(Ho 9:15).

And a century later God had this to say about the people of Judah:

My inheritance has become to me like a lion in the forest.  
She roars at me;  
therefore I hate her.  
(Jr 12:8).

Antinomianism is not only a heresy that caused considerable mischief in the Lutheran Church four centuries ago; it's alive and well today in the church that bears Christ's name. The sin we inherited from our first parents, the private pet sin we coddle, the self-deception we practice, the pitiful self-defense we erect to save face and to ease our accusing conscience, the wrong-headed fear of offending the sensibilities of our parishioners— all these have conspired to blind us to the nature of the heathen at work within us. Believing that God hates and punishes sin is necessary if Christ is to enter our hearts. Warning of a God who hates sin — all sin — is difficult, but it's necessary if we are to prepare the Savior's way into the hearts of people. "By making sin small, we make Christ small," Dr. Walther said a century ago (*Law and Gospel*, p.106). "We must preach people into hell before we can preach them into heaven" (118). "Whoever does not believe in his own sin does not believe in the Savior, either," Prof. Pieper said three-quarters of a century ago. We respect the marvelous uniqueness of the Scripture, first of all, by *letting the Law of God do its important work*.

The Law of God, however, necessary as it is, was never intended by God to be his final word to the human race. Applying the uniqueness of the Scripture in our preaching ministry means *recognizing* (to use Luther's words) *that in God's household the Law is the servant-girl, not the mistress*. By itself the Law can do only one of two things.

It can *produce terror* in the human heart, as it did in the case of Martin Luther. "I hated God," he later confessed. Or the Law can *harden people* in pharisaic self-righteousness. Listen to the apostle Paul: "Apart from law, sin is dead... but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life, and I died" (Ro 7:8f). According to Dr. Walther, the preacher has preached the Law of God properly when his hearers have been led to say: "If that man is right, I am lost" (*Law and Gospel*, p. 82).

But the purpose of orthodox preaching is not only to humble a person, but to help him, not only to shame him, but to save him. I show respect for the marvelous uniqueness of the Christian Scriptures by recognizing that God deals with people not primarily in terms of demand but of promise.

Back to our study of next Sunday's sermon text. Where does that text make me glad? Text and context emphasize that what God demands he has given us in his Son, who became our Substitute. He who had no sin became what he was not — he became sin for us. He traded places with us, first of all, under the *judgment* of a righteous God, intercepting and absorbing in his own holy body the fiery lightning bolts of God's white-hot anger over our sin. On the skull shaped hill Jesus was damned by his Father; he went to hell. And now a righteous God can rightly consider the penalty for sin to have been paid for a whole world of sinners.

Respecting the marvelous uniqueness of the Scripture means recognizing that Christ, our Substitute, has not only *satisfied God's anger over our disobedience*, but that he has also *met God's demand for obedience*. In the meditations and sermons I read and hear I don't hear nearly enough about the active obedience of Christ. Christ not only removed from my record something that would otherwise have sentenced me to an eternity without God. He credited to my account something that had been missing. Christ traded places with us also under the *demands* of a holy God. God can therefore look upon every human being as having flawlessly met his Law's requirements.

There's still more to the marvelous uniqueness of God's Good News. The Gospel announces the unbelievable news that in Christ God has not only *freed us from the curse* of our sin but that he has also *broken the power* of sin in our lives. Christ's death and resurrection not only created a *new status for us*; they created a *new life in us*. In his letter to the Christians in Rome Paul could confidently affirm: "Sin shall not be your master" (Ro 6:14). The chains that shackled you to Satan have been broken. That dark side of my personality, that part of my makeup which is not under the control of the Spirit of God but of self is not my true nature. That's not the real me. By water and the Word the blessed Spirit of God has created a new nature, one which agrees with the will of God and delights in it.

Respecting the uniqueness of the Scripture in our preaching means we need to help our hearers understand their dual nature. They need help in learning to look at life as an unceasing civil war between our old self and our new self. They need to be reminded, first of all, *what they've got going against them*. I have the frightening ability to say no to God. And you have within your heart all that it would take to separate you from God eternally.

But our hearers need to be reminded just as regularly of *what they've got going for them*. By faith I accept the pardon Christ procured for me by living the life I owed and by dying the death I had coming. But by faith I also accept the *power* released for me when Christ broke the bonds of death and rose from the grave.

The Christian Scriptures announce these blessings to all people without exception, and without any condition. Only an unconditional Gospel can solve the problem of my guilt, and can offset my weakness. In the words of a former homiletics instructor of mine, we do not tell people: "If you will believe, if you will play God for a minute — and you are bigger than God, you see, because you don't have to believe if you don't want to — but if you will do God the favor now by accepting this, then you will cause God to forgive your sins." An iffy Gospel is no Gospel at all. God's offer of pardon and of power is absolutely unconditional; that's why it's absolutely sure.

The high voltage lines that bring these blessings from God's house to ours are the Means of Grace. Respecting the uniqueness of the Christian Scriptures means stressing *the primacy of the Means* in effecting God's blessed work in his sinner-saints. In Lutheran theology Word and sacraments are not ordinances which we obey, thereby showing our loyalty to God. They are promises which we receive by faith. Rome has often used the sword to persuade people to fall in line. The Spanish priests who accompanied the conquistadors to the shores of North America baptized the natives at the point of the sword. And Calvin's Geneva burned a bunch of people at the stake. But God has given his Church only one weapon — word, the feeble word of a preacher, a quiet word which can be shouted down and spoken against, but a word which has the "divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Co 10:4).

For a preacher to respect the uniqueness of the Scripture means to take Law and Gospel at full face value and preach both unequivocally. Siegbert Becker said it better than I can: "The

purpose of *the Law* is to make us feel guilty, to humiliate us, to kill us, to lead us to hell, and to take everything from us. The purpose of *the Gospel* is to declare us not guilty and to make us possessors of all things. Between the two of them, they manage to kill us to life” (*The Foolishness of God*, p. 140).

On the one hand, then, I dare not try to tone down the message of God’s Law to make it seem less abrasive and offensive and more reasonable. Christians must learn to live in constant tension between the Law and the Gospel. I dare not try to harmonize the two. There is no harmony between those teachings — except at Calvary.

But, on the other hand, I dare not flatten out the Gospel. It’s not respecting the uniqueness of the Scripture if from the pulpit each week I offer my hearers only warm fuzzies, “The Gospel According to Platitude,” token Gospel preaching like “God is love,” frequent references to “our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” and to “the grace of God.” Mormons also refer to Jesus as the Savior. There’s a world of difference between *talking about* the Gospel and *proclaiming* the Gospel.

When we come to the critically important Gospel portion of our sermons, do we content ourselves with repeating formulas that have become familiar to us and to our hearers? Are we reluctant to venture beyond modes of expression we have become comfortable with — reciting John 3:16, perhaps, or sections of Luther’s explanation to the Second Article? Does the Gospel heart of our sermons come out sounding the same Sunday after Sunday? If it does, don’t I run the risk of provoking a hearer to think: “Oh, that again. Why does he even bother?”

It does not make me happy to tell you that I read and hear way too many meditations and sermons that have precious little, if any, explicit Gospel content. I don’t read and hear words like “*substitute*” and “*reconcile*” nearly often enough. A doctrine I don’t hear treated often enough is the doctrine of Christ’s active obedience. When you preachers and teachers ask your students to describe what Jesus did for them, is the answer you get: “He died for me”? Why isn’t their answer: “He lived for me, and he died for me”? Why isn’t more said and heard about how Christ flawlessly obeyed his Father’s Commandments for us, that he lived life right and met the holy demands we couldn’t meet?

I don’t read and hear enough sermons that explore the marvelous concept that our justification is *forensic*. God credited Jesus with being what he was not, and God gives us credit for being what we are not. Because Jesus Christ traded himself for me in life and in death God can, without denying himself or compromising his holiness, pronounce me — a guilty sinner, mind you — innocent!

Why isn’t more heard in the Lutheran Church today about the doctrine of *objective justification* — that in that magnificent transaction on Good Friday and Easter Sunday a whole world of guilty sinners was reconciled to God? Think of it! God no longer charged a world of sinners with their sin. He canceled the debts all sinners owed him under the Law! Dr. Becker used to call that “the ultimate evidence of the grace of God.” Why isn’t more made of that in our preaching and teaching?

The Bible doctrines just mentioned are part of the goodly heritage God has given to the Lutheran church. It’s a unique heritage, wouldn’t you say — a unique understanding of the Scripture? But if Lutheran preachers don’t talk about these doctrines, nobody else is going to. For us to apply the uniqueness of the Scripture means, in the first place, to *preach justification with a Lutheran flavor*.

But justification isn’t the only doctrine of the Scripture that we preach. The Bible has a lot to say in answer to the question: “What do I do after I have been led to believe”? Applying

the uniqueness of the Scripture in the ministry of preaching means also to *preach sanctification with a Lutheran flavor*.

Each of us knows that's more easily said than done. Some of the sanctification preaching that's being done in the Protestant church today is truly horrendous. And, to be honest, some of the sanctification appeals that have hoary precedent in our own church body aren't all that great, either.

Exactly how do you go about moving a Christian from attitude A to attitude B. or from attitude X to action Y? Let a spokesman from the Evangelical camp illustrate his motivation. You know the name Chuck Swindoll. Listen to him:

“Practicing thankfulness stimulates sanctification.”

“Developing loving relationships with others may be the catalyst God will use to bring a fresh touch of his Spirit back into your church.”

“Those who wish to be God's disciples replace their selfish goals and desires with God's desire for them.”

“As your friend, let me urge you to take charge of your mind and emotions today.... Yes you can, if you will.”

What's wrong with these sanctification appeals? For starters, they totally ignore the devastating activity of the old Adam in the life of the Christian. They place all of the emphasis on human will and decision. Conversely, they're totally silent about God's grace and the Spirit's activity.

Or how about this sanctification appeal? Does this motivation sound familiar? “Jesus gave up his life for you; so now out of gratitude you ought to do something for him. His Commandments show you what he wants you to do; now do it!” This type of motivation has hoary precedent in the Lutheran Church, but it ought not be called Gospel motivation. “Since Christ bought you, it's now your duty to get to work” is little more than thinly-veiled Law motivation. Call it by its name, but don't call it recognizing the unique message of the Scripture. Call it legalism. Luther said: “The Law, like a housebreaker, wants to climb in where he does not belong.” And again: “The Law can show you which way to go, but it can't give you the strength to get there.”

How did the Pietists, who helped to write an unhappy chapter in the history of the Lutheran Church three centuries ago, approach this matter of sanctification? Pietism directed the Christian to his own resources of faith and love for the motivating power to lead a God-pleasing life. In summary: it's clear that neither Evangelicalism nor legalism nor Pietism has captured the unique message of the Scripture with regard to the sinner's sanctification.

In sharpest contrast, true Gospel motivation is based on the unique truth that what I cannot do for myself God has done. The problem that faces me in my sanctification is not that I *don't know* what God wants, it's not that I can't make up my mind to do the right thing, it's that *I'm unable to do the right thing*. By myself I don't have the power. The Christians whom we have been called to help to live to the glory of God don't need *good advice* about what *they* ought to do; they need *good news* about what God has done. At the risk of appearing to oversimplify, let me emphasize that the unique message of the Scripture regarding sanctification is this: because of what God is and because of what God has done we can be what we ought to be, and we can do what we ought to do.

The Scripture's unique message is that the Holy Spirit is the sole agent not only in *converting* people, but also in *motivating* the converted human will to choose what is good and to avoid what is evil. And just as in the case of the new birth, the Holy Spirit carries on this daily activity only through the powerful Means of Grace. Through his promise in Word and sacrament the God who once created Adam and Eve in his image is re-creating us in that image.

Our unique call to Christian people, then, is not so much "Do!" as it is "Believe!" "Trust that God's powerful Spirit is even now at work in you through the Word — the Word you have heard, the Word you have read, the Word you have remembered — equipping you to be what he has called you to be. Our life of sanctification is not our own doing; it's God's doing. Like God's verdict of "Not guilty!" it is appropriated by faith.

Instead of issuing commands to people: "Do better! Try harder!" wouldn't it be more helpful to offer them a rich diet of the promises God has given us to help us grow in our lives of dedication to him? Listen to St. Peter explain what God has done to help us be what he has called us to be:

"His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature" — sc., stop sinning (2 Pe 1:3f).

Just as in our *justification* faith accepts God's gift of *pardon*, so in our *sanctification* faith accepts God's gift of *strength* to live the life to which he has called us. Faith says "yes" to God's written promises and takes from them the strength to walk in his paths. Listen to Paul speaking to the Roman Christians: "Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (Ro 6:14). We don't always experience this, that we are dead to sin, do we? But it's important that we believe what God's Word tells us about being freed from sin.

In his first epistle St. John has a thing or two to say about false teachers, about false doctrine and false lifestyle. He continues: "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 Jn 4:4). In other words, "Christian, look what you've got going for you! Take the help God offers you!"

Recall the promise Jesus made to his fearful followers just before he left them:

"*You will receive power* when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses" (Ac 1:8).

Of course we have an old nature, part of our dreadful heritage from Adam, which constantly tempts us to doubt God and to rebel against him and to be selfish, but God's people need to be reminded that our old Adam is not our true nature. Of course Satan will talk to us as though he owns us, but God's people need to be reminded that Christ came into the world to destroy the power of Satan, and he did not fail. He died, and in him we died to sin. Through baptism we were buried with him into death. Furthermore, he didn't stay in the grave, remember? He got up. And "just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Ro 6:4). After his resurrection Christ entered upon a new life, and he promises that's the way it will be with his followers. Oh, I know we don't always feel like winners in our struggle with evil, but we have God's word for it that we are. In his word he assures us: "Christian you're not a born loser. You're not a reborn loser, either. Sin shall not be your master."

It's been said: "Most Christians live between Easter and Pentecost— on the right side of pardon, but on the wrong side of power." Isn't that a perceptive statement? We tend to live in the afterglow of Easter, "on the right side of pardon." We've got it straight that in Christ's magnificent resurrection the Father has declared he has accepted us as his children. Our sin has been atoned for, and there is nothing that hinders our fellowship with him. But we tend to live short of Pentecost, "on the wrong side of power." We're painfully aware of our sinful shortcomings, and we've convinced ourselves that we're simply incapable of living as God's children in an ungodly world. We fail to take God's promise at full face value.

What's the solution? Simply to remind God's people again and again that God has not called them to be failures, to make a botch of their Christian profession. Through the powerful Means of Grace the Spirit of God brings Christ's victory over Satan to touch my life. I am under the control of a new nature, which more and more becomes my dominant nature, a new nature which increasingly says: "To do your will, O my God, is my desire" (Ps 40:8). Of course this won't happen without a struggle. In Romans 7 St. Paul documents for us how he anguished over the old man / new man problem. Recall how his description closes:

"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God — *through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" (Ro 7:24f).

When addressing sanctification appeals to God's people, then, our call is not so much "Do!" as it is "Trust!" "Trust the God who saved you to make you strong for your tasks!"

Just one example. If we're directing a financial appeal to the saints of God, we can do a whole lot better than: "Give more; your congregation's treasury is hurting." An imperative like that might prompt loyal members to meet the current budget crisis, but it isn't likely to change their giving habits over the long haul. How much better, how much more helpful to remind the people of God: "God has not called us to be selfish and self-centered. He has called us to be his people, who put him first. There are many things God will put up with in the human heart, but second place is not one of them. To help you put him first in your life — on payday, too — God offers you this guarantee: "Christian you put me first, and I promise you will lack for nothing you need for body and soul."

"He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food *will also supply and increase your store* of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that *you can be generous on every occasion*" (2 Co 9:10f).

"*My God will meet all your needs* according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Php 4:19).

That's what God has promised you, and he can't lie. He asks you to believe his promise, to take him at his word.

What is the dominant mood of the verb in our sanctification talk? It's not the *imperative*: "Do this..." "Stop doing that..." "You ought to..." "You should be grateful; now get grateful" is not the unique message of the Scripture. "You know what you should be doing; now do it!" may be an effective way to sell Nike products, but it's not the unique message of the Scripture. God does not deal with his children primarily in terms of command, but in terms of promise.

Neither is the dominant verb mood in our sanctification talk the *subjunctive*: "Let us..." "May we..." "I gave my life for thee; what hast thou given for me? I spent long years for thee;



hast thou spent one for me?” may be the unique message of Hymn 405, but it’s not the unique message of the Scripture. In Lutheran theology sanctification is supernatural activity, not the reasoned response of reasonable men and women.

In the unique message of the Scripture, the primary verb mood in sanctification talk is the *indicative*. It’s those magnificent indicatives of the New Testament that are the backbone for our sanctification talk

“We *have* life... boldness... forgiveness... confidence...”

“We *are* God’s workmanship...”

“You *are* the salt of the earth.”

“I *am* the vine... If a man remains in me and I in him, he *will bear* much fruit...”

“You *will receive* power...”

“Sin *will not be* your master...”

“I *can do* everything through him who gives me strength.”

The Scripture’s unique message is that the Holy Spirit is the powerful agent not only in converting people, but also in motivating the converted human will to choose what is good and to avoid what is evil. That has always been the strength of apostolic teaching. It still is.