

LAW & GOSPEL

A THEOLOGY FOR SINNERS (AND SAINTS)

Study Guide

A MOCKINGBIRD PUBLICATION

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

One of the goals of Mockingbird's latest publication, *Law & Gospel: A Theology for Sinners (and Saints)*, is to take a "big idea" and communicate it as down-to-earth as we can. To that end, we've created this reader's companion and study guide to help small groups, individuals, retreats, evangelists, and churches articulate this distinction that's at the core of the Christian life. We hope there's enough room in this guide for fresh epiphanies about how Law and Gospel affect our relationships, both outside and inside the walls of the church.

FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

If you're using this guide as a companion to the book, each section in the study guide will likely take about a half-hour. This time estimate may vary greatly, however, depending on the amount of introspection invested in each chapter. If any questions seem confusing, or you need help finding points of reference to the material, use the leader's notes to help jog your memory or expand your thinking.

FOR SMALL GROUP STUDY

Each of the six sessions should have enough material to provide for an hour or 90-minute small group study. Lots of interaction and sharing is encouraged! There is an attached leader's guide to help a moderator keep the conversation rolling, with tips, Bible references, and page numbers for key passages. Each question has supplemental material in the leader's guide, from examples in pop culture to optional follow-up questions. Group study is a great way to leverage each other's experiences as starting points for reflection with this material.

FOR LARGE GROUP STUDY

When discussing *Law & Gospel* in settings like retreats, classes, or sermons, this study guide should provide an excellent framework for your preparation. Feel free to mine the guide for questions, icebreakers, illustrations, or Bible references to help your

presentation. Tear it apart, mix it back up, do what you'd like—if we can help you more clearly communicate the distinction between the Law and the Gospel, our goal for this project will have been achieved.

No matter what setting you choose, know that the Mockingbird team sends you their prayers and well wishes. May God use this opportunity to strengthen your faith, open your eyes, revive your hearts, and give you rest with his promise of objective comfort.

LESSON 1

THE LOWERCASE “L” LAW

pages 11-38

INTRODUCTION

The German theologian Martin Luther once said: “The distinction between law and gospel is the highest art in Christendom.”¹ Swiss theologian John Calvin agreed: “Those who do not follow this method of treatment [distinguishing law and gospel] will never be adequately versed in the Philosophy of Christ.”² Many of the Church’s greatest minds, from St. Paul to St. Augustine to 20th-century theologians Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer have wrestled with the implications of this theological dichotomy.

As we study *Law & Gospel* together, we’ll start by looking at the first half of the pairing: the “law.” Notice that, here, the letter “l” is lowercase. That’s intentional—in this study, we will differentiate between the lowercase “l” laws of our world with the uppercase “L” that is God’s Law. Lowercase “l” laws can be broadly defined as the rules that govern our daily lives.

TO BEGIN

1. Take a moment to write down some laws—legal laws, workplace regulations, etc.—that you obey on a regular basis. What are the benefits of obeying these laws? What are the consequences of disobeying?
2. Now, take a moment to write down some *unspoken* laws that you obey on a regular basis. What are the outcomes of obeying/disobeying them?
3. Are there any laws that you break on a regular basis? Are there consequences or benefits to breaking those laws?

1. Weimarer, Ausgabe 36:41.31

2. Battles edition of 1536 edition, op. cit., 365. Delivered by Nicolas Cop on his assumption of the rectorship of the University of Paris; there is a wide consensus among Calvin scholars that Calvin was the author. See: <https://www.whitehorseinn.org/resources/free-articles/180-horton-law-gospel#5n>

GOING DEEPER

4. What laws are easy for you to keep? What laws are harder?
5. Let's get specific. What laws do you think affect our community here (small group, church, retreat community)? What are the outcomes of obeying/disobeying?
6. Think about all the laws we just mentioned. It seems as if every area of our lives are dictated by a set of laws with rewards or consequences for obedience. Why do you think that is?

FROM THE BOOK:

In this theology of Law and Gospel, a basic tenet is that *we can better understand our relationship to the Law of God by examining our relationship with little-l law*, because the psychological impact of them is often the same. The little-l law—'Thou shalt be beautiful' or 'Thou shalt be successful'—is often more measurable than the Law of God, as well as more salient in people's lives. That is, the pressure to be well-liked or valued at work is often stronger than the pressure to be a perfect person, and while holiness is usually invisible, things like salary, number of social media followers, and body weight can be easily measured. So it's easiest to talk about law where most people, regardless of beliefs, actually live: to start from the bottom up. (*Law & Gospel*, pp. 18-19)

As a starting point for describing how laws operate in our day-to-day lives, *Law & Gospel* shares the story of Tom, whose parents impose a little-l law on their son re: his academic future. Tom receives an **imperative**: It's the Ivy League or bust. The **measure** of Tom's success is simple: He must receive an Ivy League diploma. The process begins with an **accusation** ("You are not Ivy League material") that he must disprove. Theoretically, Tom has **control** over the process—if he is admitted and passes his classes, he'll achieve his goal and obey the law. And yet, that control is an illusion: Despite his hard effort, he cannot achieve what the law demands. So the result, when he drops out of Princeton, is the ultimate **death** of his Ivy ambition, as well as the death of his parents' plans for their son.

BRINGING IT HOME

7. What did you make of Tom's story? Did it feel similar to a story in your own life?
8. Let's look at a law from our own lives. Bring to mind any law you've experienced recently—it could be as simple as a speed limit or as complex as unspoken family dynamics.
 - a. What is this law's **imperative**?

- b. What is this law **measuring**?
 - c. How does this law **accuse** you?
 - d. How does it promise **control**?
 - e. What could **die** or be lost if this law is not fulfilled?
9. What percent of your daily interactions are governed by a law?

THINKING AHEAD

10. What are some laws that govern your relationships (thinking especially of friends, spouses, etc.)? Do you have any relationships that aren't governed by the law?
11. Are your interactions with God governed by the law?

FURTHER READING *from mbird.com*

- **The Church of Cool** - Churches trying to measure up to the “law of hipness”
- **But Now We're Stressed Out** - Students wrestling with the imperatives of college admissions
- **Demand, Achievement, and Chinese Mothers** - An accusation against western parenting trends

LESSON 2

THE CAPITAL “L” LAW OF GOD

pages 11-38

INTRODUCTION

Last lesson, we discussed how our world runs on a variety of lowercase “l” laws. Tom, our Ivy League dropout, provided the context for our study. We noted that the law worked on Tom in five unique ways: The **imperative** to go Ivy was both a **measurement** of his success (and his parents’ expectations), and it was an **accusation** that he wasn’t “good enough” for the Ivy League. And the process to prove the accusation wrong seemed totally within his **control**. When he did not live up to the law’s demand, dropping out to attend a larger state school, he experienced a **death** on multiple levels: the death of his Ivy League ambition, the death of his parent’s wishes, etc.

This week, we’re going to look at laws with a divine sanction. God himself has his own set of laws which are intended to govern the world and its people. Both God’s Law and our response to it will have a lot in common with our “little-l” laws. But God’s Law, as we’re about to see, is unique—and our response to it will also be unique.

REVIEW

1. Did you think of or experience any more little-l laws since the last time we gathered?
2. Are all of the laws we discussed last week good? What do you think separates the “good” laws from the “bad” ones?

LOOSENING UP

3. Assuming God is a “good God” (an assumption not shared by all, of course!) what kind of laws do you think he would make?
4. Recall the anecdote from 1 Chronicles mentioned in the introduction to *Law & Gospel*. Uzzah dies because he touches the ark, even though his intentions to prevent it from hitting the ground seem noble. Is that a “good law” or a “bad law”?

FROM THE BOOK:

In Christian terms, we talk about God's demand for us to "be perfect...as your heavenly father is perfect" (Mt 5:48) as God's Law, the moral requirements for how we should live our lives...

It gives us a picture of the good life—imagine a community which obeys all the commands of God, one that successfully avoids anger, pride, envy, lust, and greed. God commands his people to do these things so that "all may go well with you and your children after you" (Dt 12:25). What more could you ask for? We know exactly what we must do to live good, full lives, and to give our children the best chance at doing the same. The Law is like a loving father making his child go to bed early, later making her do her homework, and later forbidding her from drinking and driving. (*Law & Gospel*, pp. 18-19)

GOING DEEPER

5. St. Paul writes that God's Law is "holy and just and good" (Rm 7:12). From what you know so far, do you agree?
6. The book says God's Law is to "be perfect...as your heavenly father is perfect." Do you think he was being serious, or was Jesus just being hyperbolic?

FROM THE BOOK (*cont'd*)

If the law were simply a matter of doing or not doing, commission or omission, we might reasonably imagine we have a shot at keeping it. And sometimes the echoes of law we hear in society are strictly behavioral. Not so with the Law of God. It goes a step further. Christ himself applies the divine ordinance to motivation as well as action. In the Sermon on the Mount, instead of simply prohibiting acts of murder, he prohibits thoughts of murder. Later on he tells us not to worry about *anything*. It turns out he is just as concerned with the inner life as the outer. In his summary of the Law, Jesus even commands us to...love. (*Law & Gospel*, p. 27)

Take Jesus' **imperative**, "Do not worry," which implies that, by worrying, a person betrays their lack of trust in God's daily provision. It becomes a **measure** of one's faithfulness. It **accuses** its hearer of a weak faith. "Yes," says the sinner with the illusion of **control**, "I will totally stop worrying and trust God." And yet, when anxiety overwhelms us, our moment of trust in God **dies** as a result.

GOING DEEPER (*cont'd*)

7. How does God's intention to give us a picture of "the good life" differ from the little-l laws of our world? How are they the same?
8. Pick any of God's other laws and put it through the same exercise.
 - a. What is this law's **imperative**?
 - b. What is this law **measuring**?
 - c. What is the **accusation** of this law?
 - d. How does this law promise its hearer **control**?
 - e. What could **die** or be lost if this law is not fulfilled?
9. Does breaking God's Law feel any different than breaking a little-l law? How so?

Unlike the little-l laws of our world, God's Law has one extra function: "the **death of the Old Adam.**" While, sure, God wants you to have a "good life," there's a more important task at hand.

The Old Adam refers to human nature after the Fall. The Old Adam tries to justify himself, tries to be "like God" in the Garden and deceives himself, like the Pharisees, into thinking he's doing 'pretty well'...We may have the illusion of moral self-mastery when Moses tells us not to murder, but what about when Jesus says we'll be liable to hell-fire for insulting someone? (*Law & Gospel*, pp. 36, 38)

BRINGING IT HOME

10. How does the Law "Do not worry" result in the **death of the Old Adam**? How about the Law "Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect"? How about the Law you examined back in question 9?

THINKING AHEAD

11. How might you respond to God's Law if you weren't convinced that God was good?

FURTHER READING *from mbird.com*

- [Christian Battle Lines and the Narcissism of Small Differences](#) - A reflection on how Christians minimize the command to “be perfect.”
- [Frasier Crane as Lawgiver? The Good Doctor and the Sermon on the Mount](#) - When our attempts at creating laws backfire, in comparison to God’s Law.
- [Squatters Rights, Impossible Commands, and My Fitness Pal](#) - How God’s Law, unlike other laws, is impossible to keep.

LESSON 3

OUR RESPONSE TO LAW: FIGHT, FLIGHT, OR APPEASEMENT

pages 39-42

INTRODUCTION

In our sessions thus far, we've discussed two sets of laws: the little-l laws of our everyday lives, and the biblical Law of God. These two forms of law have many things in common: they're **imperatives** that **measure** and **accuse** us, and they offer **control** if we obey them. Failure to obey them ends in some kind of **death**, whether that's the spiritual death of our connection to God, or the death of our connections with other people. In the case of God's Law, we also experience the **Death of our Old Adam**, where the parts of our soul that trust ourselves more than God are shaken at their foundations.

As we are measured, accused, killed, victorious over, or threatened by laws, human beings tend to respond in three ways. But before we dive in, let's review.

REVIEW

1. Where, since the last time we gathered, did you experience another little-l law?
2. Recall your emotions and how you responded when confronted with that law's demand. How did you respond?

LOOSENING UP

3. There are a handful of law-resenting character types that permeate our pop culture. Think of the tattooed chain-smoking preacher's kid, or the child of a politician who supports the opposing party. Can you think of any others?
4. Think about a time you tried to use a law and it backfired. Maybe you wanted to institute a new rule at work, or teach good behavior to a child. How did that attempt at using the law backfire?

FROM THE BOOK:

As we have noted, whenever the Law is coming, condemnation follows close behind. Whenever an expectation stands before us—from our coach, from ourselves, from God himself—we are either condemned by our failure before it, or made to be condemners in our fulfillment of it. The Law is the unfeeling voice of The Coach—it tolerates no excuses, it accepts no shortcuts. The Law is good, in that it proffers good fundamentals ('Keep your head down when fielding a groundball,' 'You shouldn't smoke,' 'Spend only money that you have,' etc.), but the failure which pursues it always creates a reaction. When we are criticized, we must defend. (*Law & Gospel*, p. 40)

It turns out, human beings don't like being told what to do. We don't like to be measured, accused, controlled, or existentially murdered! This passage from *Law & Gospel* suggests human beings interact with any law—big-L or little-l—in three primary ways: **fight**, **flight**, and **appeasement**. A good example from the Bible is that of a rich, young, successful ruler coming to Jesus for a word about how to also gain success in the afterlife.

And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me 'good'? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother.'" And [the ruler] said, "All these I have kept from my youth." When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. (Luke 18:18-23, ESV)

GOING DEEPER

5. The ruler first asks Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This is a question of **appeasement** ("how might I appease the Law of God to gain eternal life") Go back to the little-l law of Question 1—what would appeasing that law look like?
6. Jesus responds to the ruler with God's Law (to be specific, five of the Ten Commandments), and the ruler says defensively, "I have kept all these from my youth." This is a **fight** response—the ruler pushes back against Jesus, suggesting that he has indeed upheld God's big-L Law. Go back to the little-l law of Question 1—what would fighting that law look like?
7. Jesus responds to the ruler's fight with a knock-out blow: He heightens the Law. "Prove you've obeyed God's Law by giving away your wealth to the poor. Show me perfection. Show me you love others more than yourself." With great sadness, the ruler retreats and gives up being a disciple of Jesus. This is a **flight** response—when

fight and **appeasement** failed, the ruler turned and fled. Once again, go back to the little-l law of Question 1—what would fleeing that law look like? (P.S. Do you see Jesus’s attempt here to bring about the **death of the Old Adam**?!)

8. Think of some other famous “prodigals” in the Bible. Were they responding to a law with **appeasement**? How about “prodigals” in our pop culture? How about prodigals in your own life?

BRINGING IT HOME

9. Think back to Question 4, a time when you tried to use the law and it backfired. Did you receive a **fight**, a **flight**, or an **appeasement** response?
10. Privately, for about 5 minutes, think about the Law of God that you regularly disobey. How are your struggles like a fight? How are they like a flight? How are they attempts at appeasement? Are there any other responses you can think of besides these three?

THINKING AHEAD

11. The ruler presents for us *the* great question of our study: How do we relate to God when we cannot appease his Law, we cannot fight his Law, and we cannot flee from his Law?

FURTHER READING *from mbird.com*

- [Joan Rivers Fought the Law...](#) - The title is misleading, as the post is actually about comedienne Joan Rivers’ lifelong attempt to appease the law of fame, youth, and beauty for female celebrities.
- [The 3 Responses to Conflict](#) - A more in-depth analysis of “Fight, flight, and appeasement” with help from *New York Times* Columnist David Brooks
- [Resolving to Love Calvin and Hobbes \(20 Years Later\)](#) - Bill Watterson’s beloved creations cataloged our attempts to fight, flee, and appease our culture’s little-l laws, creating lots of laughs in the process.

LESSON 4

THE GOSPEL: NEWS, GIFT, FORGIVENESS JUSTIFICATION, CITIZENSHIP, JESUS

pages 43-63

INTRODUCTION

So far, we've undertaken an in-depth study of law—God's Law and the little-l laws of our everyday lives. These two laws have many things in common: They're both **imperatives** that **measure** us and **accuse** us, and they promise us **control** if we can obey them. Failure to obey them ends in **death**, whether that's the spiritual death of our connection to God or the death of our connections with other people. In the case of God's Law, we also experience the **death of our Old Adam**, where the parts of our soul that trust ourselves more than God are shaken at their foundations. Human beings generally respond to the law by **fight, flight, or appeasement**.

Last week, we ended with the most important question of our study: How do we relate to God if we can't **fight**, can't **flee**, and can't **appease** his Law? The answer is not a method or a strategy but a person. Jesus is God's answer for relating to us apart from His Law, or for that matter, any law, big-L or little-l.

REVIEW

1. Many cultures and subcultures try to “call dibs” on Jesus by suggesting that he supports their little-l laws. Can you think of any examples?
2. How might some folks fight, flee, or appease the Jesus in those little-l laws?

LOOSENING UP

3. In his letter to the Romans, Paul shares his dismay that many of his fellow Jews have not embraced the message about Jesus. He says that “Christ is the end of the Law” (Rm 10:4). Given what we've studied so far, what do you think it means that “Christ is the end of the Law?”

FROM THE BOOK:

Though the Law is conditional—a two-way street—the gift of Christ is unconditional. His affection cannot be leveraged or merited. This is what we mean when we talk about the attitude of grace, which is one-way love, or ‘love in the midst of deserved judgment.’ Jesus simply gave—his attention, his power, his very self—and to the wrong people!...Most things in life are complicated, but this is not one of those things. Something is either a gift or a wage—it can’t be a little of each (Rm 5:15). The moment that a price or condition enters the equation, it is no longer a gift, no longer grace. (*Law & Gospel*, p. 52)

Whereas both big and little-l laws are premised on a condition (“If you do X, then the result will be Y”), Jesus’s death and resurrection opens up a new way of relating to God: “Because I, God, have done this, *therefore* nothing more is required of you.” This is not unlike the biblical distinctions between news and knowledge and between a gift and a wage.

GOING DEEPER

4. Think of a time you received a gift with a string attached. Did it really turn out to be a gift?
5. The book suggests that news has two key features: it comes from the outside, and it applies to you, the hearer. Share a time when you received “good news”—did it meet those two requirements?

FROM THE BOOK (*cont’d*):

If Christ is the Gift of God [through his death and resurrection], what is it that he imparts? In giving himself, what are we receiving? This has been the subject of fierce debate over the centuries, a profound and important question but not an unanswerable one, at least partially. Let us take our cue from St. Paul:

“In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the **forgiveness** of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.” (Ephesians 1:7)

“He was delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our **justification**.” (Romans 4:5)

“He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the **kingdom** of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:13-14) (*Law & Gospel*, p. 55)

While Paul uses other language to describe the gifts we receive from Jesus, it's enough for now to look at three: **forgiveness**, **justification**, and **citizenship in God's Kingdom**.

GOING DEEPER (*cont'd*)

6. **Forgiveness** has to have some basis in truth. The book gives the example of a broken cell phone, how a word of forgiveness makes sense because the cell phone was restored. We know God forgives, because we see Jesus's "blood on the floor." Think of a time that you were forgiven—how did you know it was real forgiveness?
7. **Justification** is a legal term meaning "to declare someone in the right" or "to have a verdict ruled in your favor." It implies the end of all discussion and consideration of a question. Have you ever met someone who has "something to prove"? Have you ever met someone who had "nothing to prove"? What differences would you note between their attitude and character?
8. You are (most likely) a **citizen** of a particular state. What did you do to gain that citizenship? What benefits do you have because of your citizenship?

BRINGING IT HOME

9. You, by virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, are a **forgiven** child of God. What might your Christian life look like if you trusted that God was totally 100% not mad at you?
10. You, by virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, are **justified** in the courtroom before God. What might your Christian life look like if you didn't have anything to prove to God and to the world?
11. You, by virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, are a **citizen** in the kingdom of God. What are some of the benefits you receive as a member of *this* kingdom?

THINKING AHEAD

12. A piece of news or a true gift can change a person's heart. How might someone's heart change if this Good News—God's gift of Jesus—actually hit home?

FURTHER READING *from mbird.com*

- [Green River Killer and the Bearded Old Man](#) - Forgiveness is not for the faint of heart.
- [Justifying our Lives Away](#) - Proving one's righteous standing isn't just for the religious among us!
- [Now You're Special to Me: Downton Abbey and the Adoption of Daisy](#) - A story of the heartfelt gift of "new citizenship," from the PBS drama.

LESSON 5

THE FRUITS OF THE GOSPEL

pages 65-80

INTRODUCTION

In the last session, we discovered that Jesus has given us a way of interacting with God apart from the Law. The *quid-pro-quo*, tit for tat, this-for-that transaction model of relationship is gone. Instead, through the **gift** of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, we've got **good news!** God has **forgiven** us, **justified** us (declared us upright), and made us **citizens** of his kingdom. We're no longer subject to the **imperatives** of laws, both big and little-l, nor are we subject to their **accusation** and **measurements**. We've certainly lost some **control** over the matter—after all, this is God's one-way decision whether we like it or not—but amazingly there's no longer a specter of **death** hanging over us or our relationships.

REVIEW

1. Our previous lesson explained that, because of Jesus's death and resurrection, God's relationship to us is now "one way," that is, no longer based on transaction. What other relationships in a person's life are "one way" instead of "two way"?
2. Let's play pretend. You are on a TV show in which you watch clips of a relationship, and you must guess if their love is "one way" or "two way." What's your strategy? What are you looking for if a relationship is one way? How about two way?
3. What relationships in your life are law-based? What relationships in your life are grace-based?

FROM THE BOOK:

The Gospel has been known to produce fruit in the lives of those who take it to heart. These are characteristics of people who know themselves to be free from the Law and saved through grace as a result of Christ. St. Paul speaks of the "fruits of the Spirit" as being love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). These are important and natural outgrowths of the Spirit's presence in the lives of believers, but we're just going to speak about 'fruits of the Gospel'—immediate effects of the message of justification...

Talk about fruits almost always alienates people, because it is always experienced as accusation, even after you believe. If a pastor says, “The Gospel makes us *this* way,” an honest young person in the congregation may think “Then why am I *that* way instead.”... When there are fruits, this a good way of talking about them. It’s not up, up, up—like threading through a career track or learning how to knit. The Christian life is not like acquiring a skill...

The Gospel is for sinners and remains for sinners, as long as we’re on this earth. (*Law & Gospel*, pp. 63-65)

In the same way that biblical lists of “Spiritual Gifts” or “Deadly Sins” do not compose closed categories, Paul’s “fruits of the Spirit” are not a complete list, either. In fact, when the light bulb clicks on for someone about the nature of God’s love, it is a catalyst for a surprising shift in disposition, including **humility**, **receptivity**, **gratitude**, **love**, **spontaneity**, **humor**, **freedom**, and **comfort**.

GOING DEEPER

4. The word **humble** is related to the word humiliation. It’s not a lessening of sin but a deeper awareness of it. Share a story of someone who you think embodies this deep awareness of sin.
5. The most **receptive** Christians, meaning Christians most willing to try new ideas, are receptive because the Gospel has helped them to realize they don’t have all the answers. They’re willing to look to other people and places for solutions, truth, beauty, and goodness. Share a story of someone you think embodies this willingness to search for answers outside their routines and patterns.
6. Thanksgiving was declared the most “psychologically correct” holiday by *The New York Times* in 2011 for its “attitude of **gratitude**.” Share a story of someone you think embodies the best of Turkey-day spirit.
7. One way you can tell you’re **loved** is by how vulnerable and honest you can be with someone without fear of repercussion. Who is someone you can be vulnerable and honest with? Why are you not afraid to share with them?
8. People who can afford to make **spontaneous**, off-the-cuff decisions are usually those without expectations to meet or people to please. Who do you know that embodies that “free spirit” lifestyle as a result of the gospel?
9. In the realm of grace, not only can we laugh, but we can laugh at our own faces in the mirror. Share a story of someone who funnels their **humor** for the sake of the gospel.
10. **Freedom** is often the root of these dispositions: freedom from measurement,

accusation, expectation, death, or the pressures of being in control. When you think of freedom, who most comes to mind?

BRINGING IT HOME

11. Do you think that little-l laws could produce any of these dispositions?
12. The gospel is true regardless of whether or not you feel it or see its fruits. It's true because Jesus died and rose again—that's an objective fact. But when we don't "feel it" to be true, it makes the Christian life harder. What might you do, given the freedom you have apart from the Law, to remind yourself of the truths of the Gospel?

THINKING AHEAD

13. The authors were cautious when they started to discuss these fruits of the Gospel. Think back to previous lessons—how might these fruits be confused with laws? How would that change them?
14. We've spent a lot of time talking about law and gospel. Have you gotten any better at telling the two apart?

FURTHER READING *from mbird.com*

- [Hockey Rocky: Imputation and All-Star John Scott](#) - An unassuming player is declared an all-star by fluke, then performs like an all-star as a result.
- [Feeding Ice Cream to Adopted Children: Unconditional Love on This American Life](#) - An excerpt from our publication *This American Gospel*, bring the tissues for this story about a rebellious adopted child.
- [Robert Downey Jr., Mel Gibson, and the Idiot Forgiveness of God](#) - Two Hollywood superstars giving fresh voice to the old scripture, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

LESSON 6

THE ART OF DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN LAW AND GOSPEL

pages 81-95

INTRODUCTION

Over the past five sessions, we've spent time looking at law, the Law, the Gospel and its fruits. In this last section, like senior students completing a capstone course, we will practice the "art" of distinguishing between Law and Gospel, and spend time discussing one last gospel fruit.

Sadly, we cannot simply analyze a list of propositions and divide them into the appropriate "law" or "gospel" category. It's a much harder process than that. Using this distinction to speak to yourself and using this distinction with others is, in many circumstances, a work of the Holy Spirit, an epiphany of inspiration. That, of course, doesn't disqualify us from a little bit of practice during our session together.

TO BEGIN

1. Our previous session described how the Gospel is the right environment for growing "fruit," in a way that the Law could not. Take a moment to recall some of the "fruits of the Gospel." Are there any that you think should be added to the list?

GOING DEEPER

2. It's good to remember that neither the Law nor the Gospel are bad—God uses both to accomplish his goals on earth. It's important, though, to be able to tell the difference between them. What do God's Law and the Gospel have in common? How are they different?
3. Spend a moment thinking about when you expected law or gospel and received the opposite. Was it good news or bad news? Was it a gift or a wage? Did the experience end positively?

FROM THE BOOK:

A strong belief of Luther, and those who follow in his footsteps, is that people should not be enticed to church by the Gospel and then, after believing, turn toward self improvement. The Law always kills, and the Spirit always gives life. This death and resurrection of a believer is not a one time event, but must be repeated continually: It is the shape of the Christian life. On Sundays, therefore, some form of the Law is ideally preached to kill, and the Gospel to vivify—“the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:16). But in many situations, the Law is mistakenly preached to give life, on the assumption that the believer, unlike the new Christian, has the moral strength to follow the guidelines. This leads to burnout, often producing agnostics or converts to Eastern Orthodoxy. (*Law & Gospel*, pp. 83-84)

Being able to use and understand both Law and Gospel is key to remaining a Christian as we “run with endurance the race set before us” (Hebrews 12:1). God’s Laws are **imperatives** that **measure** and **accuse**, and although they offer us **control** if we **appease** them, we would rather **fight** with God or **flee** from Him. The result is **death**, particularly the **death of the Old Adam**. The Gospel is **good news** of God’s **gift** in Jesus, his life, death and resurrection. Because of Jesus, God grants **forgiveness**, **justification**, and **citizenship** in his kingdom to those who could not and did not **appease** his law. The fruits of that gift start to take root in the believer’s heart.

ROLE-PLAY

4. Let’s role-play: A close friend comes over for dessert and coffee. As you both recline at the table, sipping your beverage and enjoying a scone, the subject turns to religion. “I connect with God spiritually through nature,” says your friend—“on the golf course, on a hike in the woods. I don’t need church to connect with the divine.” How might you respond to this revelation with Law? How might you respond to this revelation with Gospel?
5. Let’s role-play again. This time, your friend comes over for dessert and coffee, but she seems distant and more quiet than usual. After efforts to engage in small talk fail, you ask her if something’s wrong. She breaks into tears and confesses that her seemingly fine marriage has taken a turn for the worse. She’s recently discovered solid evidence that her husband is having an affair with a coworker. How might you respond to this revelation with Law? How might you respond to this revelation with Gospel?
6. One more role-play scenario. This time, you’re meeting with a friend from church. As you discuss your lives over coffee and scones, your friend confesses that he feels like a failure as a parent. “All the other kids at church are so well behaved, but my

kids are the loudest and most disturbing during the service.” The truth is, he’s right about how disruptive his kids are. How might you respond to this revelation with Law? How might you respond to this revelation with Gospel?

7. During the role-plays of questions 5, 6 and 7, what answers came to your mind quickest? Gospel-style answers or Law-type answers?

BRINGING IT HOME

8. One thing in common with our role-play friends is the lack of objective comfort. A golf course certainly can’t give objective comfort, and a word of objective comfort is certainly the doctor’s order for dark and embarrassing situations. If you wanted to speak a word of objective comfort to our role-playing friends, how might you respond?
9. With the benefit of objective comfort “in your corner,” how might the insights of Law and Gospel change your relationship with God?

THINKING AHEAD

10. How might the church be different if all Christians distinguished between Law and Gospel?

FURTHER READING

- [Those Aren’t Fighting Words, Dear](#) - The Modern Love Column in *The New York Times* wrestles with the temptation to make a marriage all about law.
- [This Kid Can Flat Out Play: Judgment and Love in *Friday Night Lights*](#) - Not sure there’s a better television parable to discuss the effective use of Law and Gospel like *Friday Night Lights*.
- [You Can’t Argue with Grace: Fathers, Sons, and This American Gospel](#) -The family’s black sheep is disarmed by a word of grace.