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About This Series

“I just don’t get it.”
“What’s that?”
“You Lutherans say you believe in the Ten Commandments, but you worship on Sunday, not the Jewish Sabbath.”
“But Jesus is our Sabbath rest.”
“So, the Third Commandment no longer applies?”

As Lutherans interact with other Christians, they often find themselves struggling to explain their beliefs and practices. Although many Lutherans have learned the “what” of the doctrines of the church, they do not always have a full scriptural foundation to share the “why.” When confronted with different doctrines, they cannot clearly state their faith, much less understand the differences.

Because of insecurities about explaining particular doctrines or practices, some Lutherans may avoid opportunities to share what they have learned from Christ and His Word. The Lutheran Difference Bible study series will identify how Lutherans differ from other Christians and show from the Bible why Lutherans differ. These studies will prepare Lutherans to share their faith and help non-Lutherans understand the Lutheran difference.
Student Introduction

With characteristic boldness Luther once defined the content of the Christian faith by saying, “Theology’s proper subject is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God his Justifier and Savior.” Though brief and provocative, it is not a rash statement. Luther, who was by vocation a professor of the Bible, understood well that theology—words about God—has its only sure foundation in Scripture, the Word of God. As his years of study continually made evident, the great subject of Scripture itself is man as sinner and God as Savior.

By his own admission, however, Luther did not always understand the content of Scripture. As a young monk he was acutely aware of what it had to say about his own sin and well-deserved condemnation, but he knew little of its comforting doctrine of God the Justifier and Savior. This he only came to know once he had learned to distinguish between Scripture’s two main themes. As Luther stated, “When I understood the proper distinction—that the Law is one thing and that the Gospel is another—then I broke through.”

For Luther, a proper distinction between Law and Gospel opened the door to a right understanding of God’s Word and, therefore, a right understanding of God’s will for humankind and our salvation. Throughout its history, the Lutheran church has continued to maintain that rightly distinguishing between Law and Gospel is absolutely necessary in this regard. The Law shows us God’s will and reveals our sin; the Gospel proclaims our salvation in Christ. To confuse these two doctrines is to remain confused about ourselves and about our God. To misunderstand them is to misunderstand the reason for the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In short, Law and Gospel are the means by which we can rightly understand the whole of the Christian faith.

This is, of course, not an easy task. Luther himself realized that no one can perfect the art of properly distinguishing between these two biblical doctrines. But in light of their great importance, he also encouraged Christians to exercise daily in this task. “If anyone knows this art well,” he said, speaking equally of pastors, professors, and parishioners, “he deserves to be called a theologian.”
An Overview of Christian Denominations

The following outline of Christian history will help you understand where the different denominations come from and how they are related to one another. Use this outline in connection with the “Comparisons” sections found throughout the study. Statements of belief for the different churches are drawn from their official confessional writings.

The Great Schism

Eastern Orthodox: On July 16, 1054, Cardinal Humbert entered the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople just before the worship service. He stepped to the altar and left a letter condemning Michael Cerularius, patriarch of Constantinople. Cerularius responded by condemning the letter and its authors. In that moment, Christian churches of the east and west were severed from each other. Their disagreements centered on what bread could be used in the Lord’s Supper and the addition of the filioque statement to the Nicene Creed.

The Reformation

Lutheran: On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X wrote a letter condemning Dr. Martin Luther for his Ninety-five Theses. Luther’s theses had challenged the sale of indulgences, a fund-raising effort to pay for the building of St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome. The letter charged Luther with heresy and threatened to excommunicate him if he did not retract his writings within 60 days. Luther replied by publicly burning the letter. Leo excommunicated him on January 3, 1521, and condemned all who agreed with Luther or supported his cause.

Reformed: In 1522 the preaching of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland, convinced people to break their traditional Lenten
fast. Also, Zwingli preached that priests should be allowed to marry. When local friars challenged these departures from medieval church practice, the Zurich Council supported Zwingli and agreed that the Bible should guide Christian doctrine and practice. Churches of the Reformed tradition include Presbyterians and Episcopalians.

Anabaptist: In January 1525 Conrad Grebel, a follower of Ulrich Zwingli, rebaptized Georg Blaurock. Blaurock began rebaptizing others and founded the Swiss Brethren. Their insistence on adult believers’ Baptism distinguished them from other churches of the Reformation. Anabaptists attracted social extremists who advocated violence in the cause of Christ, complete pacifism, or communal living. Mennonite, Brethren, and Amish churches descend from this movement.

The Counter Reformation

Roman Catholic: When people call the medieval church “Roman Catholic,” they make a common historical mistake. Roman Catholicism as we know it emerged after the Reformation. As early as 1518 Luther and other reformers had appealed to the pope and requested a council to settle the issue of indulgences. Their requests were hindered or denied for a variety of theological and political reasons. Finally, on December 13, 1545, 34 leaders from the churches who opposed the Reformation gathered at the invitation of Pope Paul III. They began the Council of Trent (1545–63), which established the doctrine and practice of Roman Catholicism.

Post-Reformation Movements

Baptist: In 1608 or 1609 John Smyth, a former pastor of the Church of England, baptized himself by pouring water over his head. He formed a congregation of English Separatists in Holland, who opposed the rule of bishops and infant Baptism. This marked the start of the English Baptist churches, which remain divided doctrinally over the theology of John Calvin (Particular Baptists) and Jacob Arminius (General Baptists). In the 1800s the Restoration Movement of Alexander Campbell, a former Presbyterian minister, adopted many Baptist teachings. These churches
include the Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches) and the Churches of Christ.

**Wesleyan:** In 1729 John and Charles Wesley gathered with three other men to study the Scripture, receive Communion, and discipline one another according to the “method” laid down in the Bible. Later, John Wesley’s preaching caused religious revivals in England and America. Methodists, Wesleyans, Nazarenes, and Pentecostals form the Wesleyan family of churches.

**Liberal:** In 1799 Friedrich Schleiermacher published *Addresses on Religion* in an attempt to make Christianity appealing to people influenced by rationalism. He argued that religion is not a body of doctrines, provable truths, or a system of ethics, but belongs to the realm of feelings. His ideas did not lead to the formation of a new denomination, but deeply influenced Christian thinking. Denominations most thoroughly affected by liberalism are the United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and Unitarianism.
Lutheran Facts

All who worship the Holy Trinity and trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins are regarded by Lutherans as fellow Christians, despite denominational differences.

Lutheran churches first described themselves as evangelische or evangelical churches. Opponents of these churches called them Lutheran after Dr. Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century German church reformer.

Lutherans are not disciples of Dr. Martin Luther but disciples of Jesus Christ. They proudly accept the name Lutheran because they agree with Dr. Luther’s teaching from the Bible, as summarized in Luther’s Small Catechism.

Although all Christian churches use Holy Scripture, Lutherans emphasize that Scripture is the final and only certain judge of doctrine and practice (sola scriptura)—not human traditions, reason, or churchly authority.

Lutherans also confess the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian) because they correctly summarize biblical teaching.

Lutherans find that distinguishing Law and Gospel is a key interpretive principle in understanding the Bible (see John 1:17; 2 Corinthians 3:6), particularly how sinners are justified before God by His grace through faith in Christ (see John 3:16–17; Galatians 4:4–5; Hebrews 2:14–17; 1 Timothy 1:15).

Lutherans believe that the proper application of Law and Gospel is imperative, so that sinners are brought to repentance through the condemnation of the Law and are justified through faith in the promises of the Gospel.

The confusion of Law and Gospel leaves one between Scylla and Charybdis: either self-righteous or with weakened faith. Such confusion confirms unrepentant sinners in their sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, and starves repentant sinners of God’s free forgiveness through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.

God’s Word: The Law

_In a madhouse there exists no law._

—John Clare

If we are in a great hurry, we may not appreciate traffic laws. If we are buying a home or opening a business, we may dislike existing zoning laws. Rules and regulations can sometimes seem highly inconvenient. Most people, however, recognize their importance. In fact, every society in the world has some form of law, some code of right and wrong. Without laws the world would become a madhouse.

1. What laws do you most frequently find inconvenient? Can you think of a good reason for the existence of these laws? What consequences would result if they were repealed?

Holy Legality

2. Read Ephesians 5:15–17; Psalm 40:8; and Romans 7:12. With what do the Old and New Testament writers associate the Law of God? How does Scripture therefore describe this Law?

3. Compare Exodus 31:18 and Romans 2:14–15. Who is able to know God’s Law? In what different ways do people come to know the Law?
4. Read and compare Ecclesiastes 7:20; 1 John 3:4; and James 2:10. Though all people are conscious of the Law, what do these passages say about our ability to keep the Law?

5. Read 1 Timothy 1:8–11. What is one of the uses for which God’s Law has been given?

6. Compare Romans 3:20 and Romans 7:7. What is a second use for which God’s Law has been given?

7. The Word of God not only warns against and reveals sin; it also clearly states the consequences of sin. Read Deuteronomy 27:26 and Romans 6:23. How serious are the consequences for breaking God’s Law?

8. The Law of God may be used in different ways. There is one thing, however, for which the Law is not to be used. Compare Galatians 3:10–11 and Galatians 5:4. What does God not intend His Law to do?

Crime and Punishment

If our civil laws can at times seem burdensome, the divine Law of God can seem even more so! No one escapes its jurisdiction. No one
escapes accusation for breaking this Law. And, if we were left to our own devices, no one would escape its penalties.

9. As you meditate on the Law of God—its nature, use, and consequences—what effects does it have on you? What emotions or reactions does the Law produce?

10. Read Galatians 3:13. Remembering what the Law can and cannot do, what comfort does Paul offer those who have not kept God’s Law?

**Utter Silence**

Paul informs us that the Law speaks “so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God” (Romans 3:19)—every mouth, the whole world. Though every society throughout the world has some form of law, not all people recognize the Law of the God who created this world.

11. Reread Romans 2:14–15. As you encounter those who do not know or do not believe the Bible, consider how you might begin to discuss both Law and Gospel with them.

**Comparisons**

**Eastern Orthodox:** “What is necessary in order to please God and to save one’s own soul? In the first place, a knowledge of the true God, and a right faith in Him; in the second place, a life according to faith, and good works” (The Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church, question 3).
Lutheran: “We believe, teach, and confess that the Law is properly a divine doctrine, which teaches what is right and pleasing to God, and reproves everything that is sin and contrary to God’s will. For this reason, then, everything that reproves sin is, and belongs to, the preaching of the Law” (Epitome of the Formula of Concord V 2–3).

Reformed/Presbyterian: “God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which He bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it; and endued him with power and ability to keep it. . . . Although true believers be not under the law as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others” (The Westminster Confession of Faith, ch. 19.1, 6).

Roman Catholic: “The holy Synod declares first, that, for the correct and sound understanding of the doctrine of Justification, it is necessary that each one recognize and confess, that, whereas all men had lost their innocence in the prevarication of Adam . . . free-will, attenuated as it was in its powers, and bent down, was by no means extinguished in them” (The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Session 6, Decree on Justification).

Baptist: “We believe that man was created in holiness, under the law of his Maker; but by voluntary transgression fell from that holy and happy state; in consequence of which all mankind are now sinners, not by constraint, but choice; being by nature utterly void of that holiness required by the law of God, positively inclined to evil; and therefore under just condemnation to eternal ruin, without defense or excuse” (The New Hampshire Baptist Confession, article 3).

Wesleyan/Methodist: “Although the law given from God by Moses, as touching ceremonies and rites, does not bind Christians, nor ought the civil precepts thereof of necessity be received in any commonwealth, yet, notwithstanding, no Christian whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral” (Methodist Articles of Religion, article 6).

Liberal: “We cannot define Christian ethics in terms of a church-controlled society. Neither can we regard Christian duty as identical with biblical precepts. . . . Christian ethics should be defined as the determination of the duties of a modern Christian living in the modern world. To define it in terms of an ethical
system belonging to another age is to fail to make Christianity ethical” (Gerald Birney Smith in *A Guide to the Study of the Christian Religion*, p. 570).

**Point to Remember**

I desire to do Your will, O my God; Your law is within my heart. Psalm 40:8

Leader Guide

This guide is provided as a “safety net,” a place to turn for help in answering questions and for enriching discussion. It will not answer every question raised in your class. Please read it, along with the questions, before class. Consult it in class only after exploring the Bible references and discussing what they teach. Please note the different abilities of your class members. Some will easily find the Bible passages listed in this study; others will struggle. To make participation easier, team up members of the class. For example, if a question asks you to look up several passages, assign one passage to one group, the second to another, and so on. Divide the work! Let participants present the answers they discover.

Each topic is divided into four easy-to-use sections.

**Focus** introduces key concepts that will be discovered.

**Inform** guides the participants into Scripture to uncover truths concerning a doctrine.

**Connect** enables participants to apply what is learned in Scripture to their lives and provides them an opportunity to formulate and articulate a defense of a key doctrine.

**Vision** provides participants with practical suggestions for extending the theme of the lesson out of the classroom and into the world.

Also take note of the Comparisons section at the end of each lesson. The editor has drawn this material from the official confessional documents and historical works of the various denominations. The passages describe and compare the denominations so that students can see how Lutherans differ from other Christians and also see how all Christians share many of the same beliefs and practices. The passages are not polemical.
God’s Word: The Law

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word, participants will (1) understand the nature of God’s Law, (2) recognize the purpose for which God’s Law has been given, and (3) appreciate the rich blessings of Christ, who has fulfilled the Law in our place.

Opening Worship

It may prove beneficial to begin this study of God’s Law with a reading of God’s Law. The Ten Commandments may be read in Exodus 20:1–17, or, if time allows, the Commandments with Luther’s explanations may be read from the Small Catechism. The hymn “The Law of God Is Good and Wise” (Lutheran Worship 329) is particularly suited to the emphases of this session. Selected verses from Psalm 119, a meditation on God’s Law, might also be read as an appropriate prayer.

Focus

1. Read, or ask a participant to read, the first paragraph. Spend some time discussing the reasons for feeling that certain laws are inconvenient. It will likely be evident that the reason most of us dislike certain laws is simply that they prevent us from doing what we want to do. This is precisely their goal! Emphasize that God, knowing all too well our sinful nature, has lovingly given us His divine Law to prevent us from succumbing to sin and being driven even further from Him.

Holy Legality (Inform)

God’s Law, like God Himself, is holy, righteous, and good. Though it threatens and accuses sinners, the Law does so as part of God’s plan to reveal our sin and our consequent need for salvation. He Himself has mercifully provided this salvation in the person of Christ,
who both fulfilled the Law and suffered its condemnation on our behalf.

2. Exhorting the Christians of Ephesus to live a holy and God-pleasing life, St. Paul distinguishes between those who are wise and unwise. The wise, he explains, are those who “understand what the will of the Lord is.” The psalmist, clearly one of the wise, proclaims that he earnestly desires to do the will of God. He goes on to say that he knows God’s will because he knows God’s Law. The Law of God does indeed express His will for our life. For this reason, the Lutheran Confessions can refer to the Law quite simply as “the immutable will of God” (Ep VI 7). Not only does the Law teach “what is right and pleasing to God,” but it also “reproves everything that is sin and contrary to God’s will” (Ep V 3). Because the Law expresses nothing less than the will of a holy, righteous, and good God, Paul can also explain that the Law itself is “holy and righteous and good.”

3. Because the Law expresses God’s holy and perfect will for His creation, He desires that all clearly know what this will is. To this end He gave the written Law to His Old Testament people. The summary of God’s Law, the Ten Commandments, Moses received on two stone tablets. Not all are descended from Israel, however. Not all have been taught the Ten Commandments as Israel was commanded to teach her children. Are some then without the Law? This is the question Paul answers in the opening chapters of Romans. While admitting that the Gentiles “do not have the law”—that is, the written Law given to Israel—he explains that “they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts.” In fact, this “natural” law was given to all people even before the “revealed” Law of the Commandments. Thus the confessors write that those before Moses (even those before the fall into sin) “had the Law of God written also into their hearts, because they were created in the image of God” (Ep VI 2). To be sure, sinful human nature prevents a perfect understanding of this natural law; but it does not prevent all understanding. For this reason Paul can explain that the Gentiles are without excuse, because, as the reformers wrote, “Man’s reason or natural intellect indeed has still a dim spark of the knowledge that there is a God, as also of the doctrine of the Law” (SD II 9).

4. While Scripture is clear that all know the Law, it is also perfectly clear that none keep the Law. The author of Ecclesiastes announces that there is no one “who does good and never sins” (Ecclesiastes 7:20). John goes on to explain the relationship between sin and the Law, stating that “everyone who makes a practice of
sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4). In agreement with St. John, the Lutheran Confessions bluntly state, “Sin is everything that is contrary to God’s Law” (SD VI 14). Lest people be tempted to think lightly of sin, to downplay their own sinfulness by believing they keep most of the Law, sinning only occasionally or breaking only minor points of the Law, James takes pains to explain the folly of this thinking. With a sweeping condemnation he declares that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (2:10). In this light, it is perfectly understandable that the confessors would note that “all Scripture, all the church cries out that the Law cannot be satisfied” (Ap III 45).

5. The Law of God is not static. God Himself uses it to produce certain effects. In fact, the Law can be put to several uses. (Note: The Lutheran Confessions denote three uses of the Law [see Ep VI 1]. Two of these apply to all people, while the third applies only to those who have first been called and redeemed by the Gospel. Discussion of this third use will therefore be reserved for a later session: “Law, Gospel, and Sanctification.”) Timothy, while noting that care must be taken to use the Law properly, gives some indication of one of its uses. He says it was made “for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane” (1 Timothy 1:9). The Law and its threat of punishment are to prevent these people from doing what their sinful nature would otherwise compel them to do. This is referred to as the first use of the Law. Luther states in the Confessions: “We hold that the Law was given by God, first, to restrain sin by threats and the dread of punishment” (SA-III II 1). Likewise, the confessors note that the Law was given “first, that thereby outward discipline might be maintained against wild, disobedient men” (Ep VI 1).

6. The Law is meant not only to prevent sin; it also reveals sin. Paul says that it is only through the Law that sin is revealed. He confesses, “If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin” (Romans 7:7). Paul does not merely comment on his own experience; expressing the same thought elsewhere, he notes that “through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). Because it is only by means of the Law that we become conscious of sin, this second use of the Law is what the Confessions call its chief use: “the chief office or force of the Law is that it reveal original sin with all its fruits, and show man how very low his nature has fallen” (SA-III II 4).

7. In addition to revealing man’s sin, the second use of the Law also reveals the consequences of sin. It reveals that the holy and sinless
God—who also created His people to be holy and sinless—does not at all take sin lightly. He Himself announces, “Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them” (Deuteronomy 27:26). The ultimate consequence of this curse, Paul explains, is death, both temporal and eternal. It is in the light of such scriptural testimony that the authors of the Lutheran Confessions acknowledge that the Law “threatens its transgressors with God’s wrath and temporal and eternal punishments” (SD V 17). Even more strongly, they write that we are “accused or condemned by God’s Law, so that we are by nature the children of wrath, death, and damnation, unless we are delivered therefrom by the merit of Christ” (SD I 6).

8. Though the Law has different uses, there is one thing for which it is not to be used. St Paul, a former proponent of the Law, makes this point again and again in his letters to the early Christian churches. “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law” (Galatians 3:11), he writes. He goes even further, stating bluntly that “you are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law” (Galatians 5:4). This is obviously no small point. Though the Law expresses God’s will; though it is holy, righteous, and good; and though it has many uses, it cannot effect salvation. Paul goes so far as to say that those who try to use it for this end have instead forfeited salvation. The confessors could therefore reach no conclusion other than that “it is evident that we are not justified by the Law. Otherwise, why would there be need of Christ or the Gospel?” (Ap III 136).

Crime and Punishment (Connect)

9. It is impossible to be nonchalant when meditating on the Law of God. It not only commands and prohibits; it points out our failure to obey and the dire consequences that result. If your meditation on the Law produces “true terrors, contrition, and sorrow” then you have properly understood it (SD II 54; see SA-III II 4). It is time to hear the Gospel!

10. Paul had reminded his readers of God’s Old Testament announcement of a curse on all those who do not fulfill the Law. He also reminds them of another biblical curse: “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Galatians 3:13). This, says Paul, applies even to Jesus Himself who hung on the cross. But how could the sinless Christ who fulfilled the Law be cursed? Paul explains that He became “a curse for us,” in our place. He who fulfilled the Law received the...
punishment deserved by those who have not. Thanks be to God! Those condemned by the Law have been redeemed from the curse of the Law.

**Utter Silence (Vision)**

11. Many do not know the Ten Commandments. Others may know them and reject them. Yet all people recognize and live their lives according to some form of law, some understanding of right and wrong. Conversation with unbelievers might begin with an attempt to understand the nature of the “law” they follow. On the basis of their explanation, you might emphasize the common ground between what they believe, what all people believe, and what is stated in the Commandments. It might then be pointed out that these commonalities suggest a common source—God Himself. Furthermore, you might ask what happens when they do not fulfill their own “law.” What consequences result? You could point out that the inability to keep even those laws which we acknowledge is an indication that there is something fundamentally wrong with mankind. Our inability to keep the Law reveals our need for the Gospel.