

HOW TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL

Discerning law from gospel is a critical skill for Christians and the hallmark of Lutheranism. Law and gospel are always connected to God's word. God brings them to you in the Bible, in preaching, in the sacraments, and in all kinds of daily activity. If you listen closely, you'll hear God speaking both law and gospel.

THE LAW

Martin Luther suggested that the law has two uses: First, to point out and condemn sin. Second, to drive the sinner toward the grace and mercy revealed in Jesus Christ and his cross.

1 LISTEN FOR THE “SHOULD.”

God uses the law to tell us what we ought to do so we maintain an orderly, peaceful, and secure world. It therefore always sounds like a demand. Words such as *should*, *ought to*, *must*, *have to*, and *shall* are a dead giveaway that the law is around somewhere.

2 LISTEN FOR THE FIRST COMMANDMENT.

“You shall have no other gods,” is what all other law rises from. The law's goal is to force sinners to act as though God's will is more important than our own.

3 DISCERN WHO'S IN CHARGE.

Demands always require you to do something to fulfill them. If you're being urged to act a certain way to make something happen, it's the law talking.

4 BE ALERT TO DEATH LURKING IN THE SHADOWS.

When you feel like the demands of life are just about killing you, you can be pretty sure it's God's law nipping at your heels.

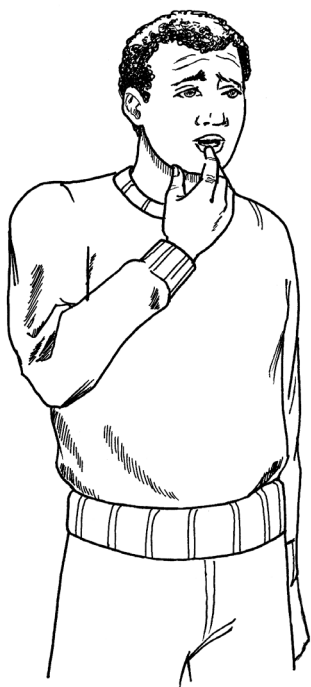
THE GOSPEL

1 LISTEN FOR THE PROMISE.

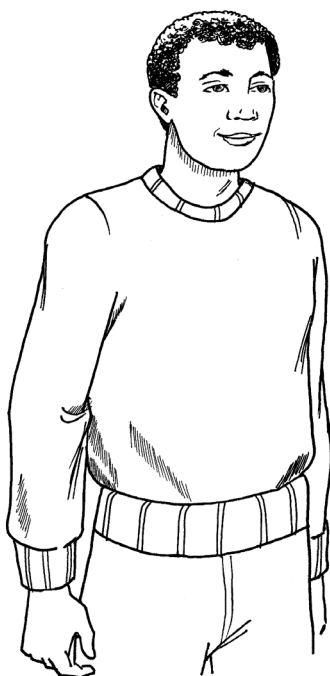
If what you're hearing tells you what Christ promises you—without any action on your part—then the gospel is present.

2 EXPECT A RADICAL SURPRISE FROM JESUS.

We sinners should never expect the good news; we should only expect God's judgment. Instead, the gospel brings sinners mercy and life from Jesus.



The law accuses and demands.



The gospel liberates and frees us.

3 LISTEN FOR THE “FOR YOU.”

The gospel is always spoken directly to sinners. If what you hear doesn't use the word *you*, it could be a good description about God or Jesus, but it's not quite the gospel. The gospel says it straight out: “You are forgiven.” “Jesus died for you.”

4 REMEMBER THE PROMISE.

When God's word has changed you, you'll see God's faithfulness in spite of the injustice in the world. When it has caused you to trust God, even though the world says you're a loser, then you can be sure you've heard the gospel.

BE AWARE

] Law and gospel can't be defined strictly. They are the ways we experience the following two things:

1. God is working continually to confront and put to death the “you” that turns away and puts your trust in other things. When the law does its work, that's what God is doing.
2. God is also working continually to create a new faithful person in you. When the gospel does its work, that's what God is doing.

] God sometimes does only the first thing, but God never brings the gospel without the law being present first. It's only when the law stops us from thinking we can make life work out on our own that we become open to hearing God's promises.