

Luther and Bonhoeffer on the Sermon on the Mount: Similar Tasks, Different Tools¹

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On the surface, Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer appear to be direct contrasts in their interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount. On the one hand, Luther regularly calls for the proper distinction between two realms, the *weltliche Reich* or temporal realm and the *geistliche Reich* or spiritual realm.² In the preface to his commentary, Luther complains that the “schismatic spirits and Anabaptists” “do not recognize any difference between

Bonhoeffer's use of the Sermon on the Mount mirrors Luther not by articulating doctrines of law and gospel but by using God's Word to condemn and construct, exposing self-invented pieties for what they are and creating faith through Christ's promise. What Bonhoeffer means by "Word" differs slightly from Luther and Bonhoeffer uses different tools to expose and comfort, yet Bonhoeffer largely mirrors Luther in using the Sermon to do the two tasks of law and gospel. In the third purpose, a larger difference between Luther and Bonhoeffer becomes apparent. Luther focuses more on God's commands fulfilled in a person's vocation in society while Bonhoeffer emphasizes the visible community of the church in which Christ is followed and his life embodied. Throughout their interpretations of the Sermon, Bonhoeffer may not say what Luther says, but he uses the Sermon on the Mount to do what Luther did. Bonhoeffer proclaims the law that exposes the "lovely disguise"¹² of "self-invented and self-chosen piety"¹³ and proclaims the gospel that carries Christ the Savior to sinners, forgiving them and calling them to a new life of obedience to his Word.

This essay will first explore selections of Luther's commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, particularly his exposition of the beatitudes. Luther's central concern becomes evident: justification by faith alone and sanctification as the fruits of faith. We will also see that Luther structures the entire Christian life according to God's Word, criticizing those who do otherwise. In this context, Luther uses the various two-realms distinctions¹⁴ as tools to criticize his opponents and concretize the Christian life in sixteenth-century Saxony. From there, I turn to Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*, showing that Bonhoeffer's polemic against cheap grace is an argument against separating sanctification from justification. The intimate connection of justification and sanctification is reinforced in Bonhoeffer's argument that "immediacy is an illusion."¹⁵ Then, I will sketch Bonhoeffer's description of the Christian life through his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount. Bonhoeffer's tools are different, but like Luther Bonhoeffer places the Word of God at the center of the Christian life and condemns the best the world has to offer so that people turn to the Word. Finally, in the conclusion, I note the similarity in the tasks of law and gospel and analyze two differences: the

not merely *found* in his work. Bonhoeffer uses God's Word law and gospel, even if he uses different tools to condemn and construct the Christian life. Compare Peter Frick, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Gerhard Ebeling: An Encounter of Theological Minds," in *Engaging Bonhoeffer: The Impact and Influence of Bonhoeffer's Life and Thought*, ed. Matthew D. Kirkpatrick (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 239–58, who shows that Bonhoeffer considers law and gospel to be problematic, but in need

primary referent of “Word of God” and the primary place where the Christian life happens. In short, Bonhoeffer is a faithful *Lutheran* interpreter of Scripture who rejected part of the Lutheran legacy in order to proclaim clearly God’s Word as condemning law and transforming gospel.

Luther on the Sermon on the Mount

Luther’s commentary on the Sermon, published in the fall of 1532, was originally presented as a Wednesday sermon series from 1530–32 during the absence of the usual Wittenberg pastor, Johannes Bugenhagen, who was supervising the reformation in Lübeck.¹⁶ In the preface to his commentary, Luther sets his agenda against two adversaries. On the one hand, Luther interprets the Sermon against the Roman Catholic “jurists and sophists” who have turned the commands of God in the Sermon into “twelve ‘evangelical counsels,’ twelve bits of good advice,” which do not apply to all Christians but only to those who desire “to attain a perfection higher and more perfect than that of other Christians.”¹⁷ For Luther, turning the sermon into evangelical counsels is problematic for three reasons. First, it makes “Christian salvation dependent upon works apart from faith,” also creating levels of Christians as if salvation did not depend on the same Word and same baptism for all. Secondly, it makes Christ’s commands optional by denying the applicability of Jesus’s words to all Christians.¹⁸ Third, it allows the jurists and canon lawyers to rule the church instead of Christ, which also supports the papal claims to temporal power.¹⁹ For Luther, the Sermon is directed to all Christians to live sanctified lives, as the fruits of faith, according to God’s command in established society.

On the other hand, Luther interprets the Sermon against a second adversary, “the new jurists and sophists, the schismatic spirits and Anabaptists.”²⁰ According to Luther, these Anabaptists disrupt the stable order of society, refusing to participate in secular government by denying that Christians can hold office or take oaths, rejecting a Christian’s right to protect his family, and condemning all who own private property. Thus, Luther claims, “They do not recognize any difference between the secular and the divine realm, much less what should be the distinctive doctrine and action in each realm.”²¹ For Luther, these Anabaptists not only deny the divine ordinance of the secular realm, but they also “mislead whole crowds of people” by making justification by faith dependent upon good works. They substitute the true Word of God for “glorious words” like “Spirit” and “fruits of the Spirit.” Instead of listening to these glorious words, a Christian “must

¹⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, Introduction to Volume 21 of *Luther’s Works*, LW 21:xix–xxi.

¹⁷ LW 21:3–4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* This is only implicit in the preface. Luther writes 6.96 Tf 1 0 0 1 41.16 107.06 107.029(n)8.90m 0 Tr

pay attention only to the Word, which shows us the right way of life that avails before God.”²²

Although Roman Catholics and Anabaptists appear to be nothing

God's Word tears down the glorious works of humanity and calls instead for humble service to the neighbor according to God's command.

According to Luther's antisemitic interpretation, Jesus preaches the beatitudes against a Jewish understanding that the good life is a life that appears good to human wisdom.²⁶ These Jews "did not want to suffer, but sought a life of ease, pleasure, and joy; they did not want to hunger nor to be merciful, but to be smug in their exclusive piety while they judged and despised other people. In the same way, their holiness also consisted in outward cleanliness...."²⁷ Not only the Jews, however, hold such a doctrine

be profane (Acts 10:15); indeed it must be the very purity with which we see God.”³³ Whether it is a Roman Catholic monk who runs away from society to live in prayerful solitude or an Anabaptist monk who makes a new society apart from established government and institutions, Luther believes that such a self-made holiness violates God’s command to love and care for the neighbor in society.³⁴

Purity of heart does not come from doing works that appear good to the world, even following Jesus’s Sermon perfectly in order to be seen by others—these are likely to be mortal sins.³⁵ Purity of heart comes from hearing God’s Word and letting it condemn one’s glorious words and works, creating a new heart that is filled with the Word of God.³⁶ Hence, Luther calls for preaching of the Word of God as law and gospel, tearing down “self-made sanctity and self-chosen worship” that threatens the true gospel³⁷ and instructing people about Christ and faith before also teaching the importance of good works according to Christ’s Word and command.³⁸ Thus, the Word of God first acts as corrosive, purifying salt, calling all to repent for living according to their own notions of piety and ignoring the duties God has blessed and given to them. Christians must constantly struggle to rely on God and his Word, to

It all depends, therefore, on really knowing and maintaining the definition of what Christ calls good works or fruits: a good work is one that is required or commanded by the Word of God and proceeds on the basis of that commandment. So a wife who is pious and faithful in her marriage can claim and boast that her station is commanded by God, that it is supported by the true, pure, and unadulterated Word of God, and that it heartily pleases God. Hence her works are all good fruit.⁵⁸

In a similar way, Luther also says that the man who hauls manure is actually hauling “precious figs and grapes” in God’s sight, even though such work is condemned by reason, since the Christian man is doing his calling in a station that helps his neighbors in society. God’s Word of promise, which justifies the sinner and makes the tree good, and command is what makes a Christian’s work good and holy, nothing else.⁵⁹

Therefore, the main question for Luther is what the Word says and what God calls his people to do. God’s Word establishes the stations that Christians inhabit and use for the good of others. It does not call the Christian to pursue perfection apart from society either in a monastery (Roman Catholicism) or in an alternative society (Anabaptism); rather, God calls Christians to love and care for their neighbors in good vocations already

time, Luther does not believe that nude reason, apart from God's Word, will

complacent Christians who have capitulated to Nazi ideology. Then, I will proceed to describe Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Matthew chapter five, including the beatitudes and the importance of the visible church-community.

Costly Grace Versus Cheap Grace and Jesus as the Mediator in *Discipleship*

Bonhoeffer begins *Discipleship* with a direct question that focuses the Christian life on Jesus alone: “What did Jesus want to say to us? What does he want from us today? How does he help us to be faithful Christians today? It is not ultimately important to us what this or that church leader wants. Rather, we want to know what Jesus wants.”⁷⁴ In this way, Bonhoeffer centers the Christian life on the incarnate Word of God: Who is this Jesus and what does he want? To ask any other question is to avoid God’s commandment with human words and works. It does not matter if Jesus’s commands seem too difficult for normal Christians; Bonhoeffer rejects the notion that the Sermon on the Mount is optional. Rather, he places *every* Christian under the yoke of Jesus.⁷⁵ In fact, following the Sermon may require painful separations from family and nation. Regardless, the Christian is called to simply obey,⁷⁶ following Jesus under his light and easy yoke (Matt. 11:28–30). No matter how difficult such a life is, because Jesus is the one who leads, Bonhoeffer can claim, “Discipleship is joy.”⁷⁷

Having centered discipleship on the Word of God enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth—just as Luther focused the Christian on hearing, believing, and living according to the Word proclaimed and written—Bonhoeffer distinguishes between “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” Bonhoeffer uses this distinction to do three things: to expose the self-invented pieties of twentieth-century Germany, cod “ hrsa 18 >> B-3.10 (w)5.706a

and discipleship; cheap grace rejects Jesus's call for Christians to follow him in his church. Instead, the Christian is to "live just like the rest of the world" since grace justifies the world and demands no self-denial or difference between the Christian and everybody else.⁸⁰ Bonhoeffer concludes his opening diatribe against cheap grace:

Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.⁸¹

Costly grace, on the other hand, is "*simply* grace."⁸² It is the call of Jesus, like the disciples received, to leave behind the nets and follow the master. This grace is costly because "it condemns sin," and "costs people their lives."⁸³ It does not allow the Christian to live as she did before, wallowing in her sin. To use Luther's language, costly grace is caustic, condemning sin yet also graciously justifying the sinner. Above all, Bonhoeffer writes, grace is costly because it cost God the life of his Son. At the same time, this costly grace is *grace* since it calls people to follow Jesus, forgives their sins, and brings them under the yoke of the incarnate God who died to give them life.⁸⁴ Costly grace, then, emphasizes the connection between justification and sanctification in the concrete call of Jesus Christ. "Faith and obedience cannot be separated from each other at all."⁸⁵ The Word of Jesus justifies the sinner, and he calls her to a life of discipleship, simply obeying and following him in the church.⁸⁶

According to Bonhoeffer, Luther's own struggle with monasticism was part of the struggle for costly grace. Monasticism initially had been "a living protest" against a cheapening of the Christian life, but over time Christendom relativized monasticism and turned it into a "special meritoriousness" for a select few.⁸⁷ Luther saw through the façade of

⁸⁰ Ibid., 44.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Jonathan D. Sorum, "Cheap Grace, Costly Grace, and Just Plain Grace: Bonhoeffer's Defense of Justification by Faith Alone," *Lutheran Forum* 21, no. 3 (1993): 20. Emphasis original. Sorum's essay is a good analysis of Bonhoeffer's distinction between cheap and costly grace that shows it is fundamentally Lutheran.

⁸³ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 45.

monasticism's costliness to see the sin embedded within it: "Luther saw the monk's escape from the world as really a subtle love for the world," which left intact the most glorious work of the world, the "pious self."⁸⁸ For Bonhoeffer, Luther condemned the sinful pretensions of the world, exposing the purity of monasticism as self-love, by calling Christians to live as Christians *in the world*. Luther did not justify the world or secular vocations as such; he rather called Christians to be disciples in the midst of their vocations. "A Christian's secular vocation receives new recognition from the gospel only to the extent that it is carried on while following Jesus."⁸⁹ For Bonhoeffer, this is costly grace.

Bonhoeffer not only uses the distinction between cheap grace and costly grace to condemn the "bourgeois-secular existence" of many Christians and call them to simple obedience following the commands of God,⁹⁰ but he makes a similar point by witnessing to Jesus Christ as the Lord who justifies the sinner and calls her to the extraordinary life of discipleship. For Bonhoeffer, the important point is not *how* Jesus calls his disciples, but *who* Jesus is.⁹¹

happen only through him. He stands not only between me and God, he also stands between me and the world, between me and other people and things. He is

Bonhoeffer's goal is to clear out all self-invented piety so that Jesus's Word will be heard for what it is, the command of the Son of God. At the same time,

The importance of the church as a community comes more into focus as Bonhoeffer moves from the beatitudes to the next section of the Sermon, Matthew 5:13-16 on salt and light. Bonhoeffer rejects Luther's understanding that the "office" of the disciples, the preaching of God's Word, is to be salt and light.¹¹³ Instead, Bonhoeffer claims, "What is meant is their whole existence, to the extent that it is newly grounded in Christ's call to discipleship, that existence of which the Beatitudes speak. All those who follow Jesus's call to discipleship are made by that call to be the salt of the earth in their whole existence."¹¹⁴ Thus, for Bonhoeffer, the disciples are salt and light precisely as they become visible to the world, a visible community of faith separate from the world.¹¹⁵ The world will not praise and adore these visible marks—such is usually a sign of self-invented piety anyway—rather, it is the visibility of being poor, strangers, meek, peacemakers, and of course being rejected and persecuted as Jesus was. In short, Bonhoeffer says that it is all one work: "bearing the cross of Jesus Christ."¹¹⁶

In this way, the Christian community is "extraordinary," and it makes space for the "extraordinariness" of the Christian life.¹¹⁷ Bonhoeffer's interpretation of Jesus's antitheses stresses this point. The Christian church is a community of simple obedience to God's law in a world of lawless faith, which is enthusiasm;¹¹⁸ it is a community of reconciliation and forgiveness in a society of power;¹¹⁹ it is a community of chastity and purity in a world of unlimited desire;¹²⁰ it is a community of truth where sin is uncovered and

blessed because of the call and promise of Jesus. Jesus's disciples are merely servants who are doing their duty according to the Word and command of God.

Word in faith, and loving the neighbor in society as God commands.¹³⁰

For Bonhoeffer, however, the Word is primarily the incarnate Son of God, Jesus himself. Jesus authorizes the proclamation of law and gospel in his church, and the Scriptures are the authoritative norm of Jesus's life and ministry, but at the heart of the Christian life is a person, Jesus of Nazareth. While Luther would say the same thing about Jesus,¹³¹ for Bonhoeffer, the

Christian life, but also for understanding nation, vocation, and public life. For Bonhoeffer, the Word that structures the Christian life is fundamentally Jesus rather than the written and proclaimed Word, which still remain essential in Bonhoeffer's thought.¹³⁵

The second major difference is how they conceive of the *locus* where the Christian life takes place. Against the new and old monastics who established pure Christianity apart from established society, Luther places the Christian in the world.¹³⁶ Luther uses the two realms distinction to emphasize that the Christian is called to love the neighbor in society and not apart from it. Thus, Luther employs the concept of office or vocation to concretize the shape of the Christian life in the world.¹³⁷ For Luther, Christians are called to do their duty—as parents, neighbors, merchants, servants, princes, and/or pastors—and it is precisely in doing their duty in society that they follow God's commands to love and serve their neighbors. Luther pointed Christians to follow territorial law¹³⁸ not b0 (s)-3.60 Tr [()1-2.90231.20 (4s)-3.60 4e c1(s)-3.60 (e)-

Christ is our new life.”¹⁴²

By centering the Christian life on the church, the most important question for Bonhoeffer is not how the Christian should live in the world but, what is the structure and order of the church? For Bonhoeffer, the church is the living body of Christ. He explains,

Jesus Christ lives here on earth in the form of his body, the church-community. Here is his body crucified and risen, here is the humanity he assumed. To be baptized therefore means to become a member of the church-community, a member of the body of Christ (Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 12:13). To be in Christ means to be in the church-community. But if we are in the church-community, then we are also truly and bodily in Jesus Christ.¹⁴³

Just as Jesus is the center point of the Christian life—his commands and example are the heart of discipleship—so the church is the body of Christ, the bodily community of Jesus, and cannot be known apart from him.¹⁴⁴ This means that the church corporately is formed into the image of Jesus. For Bonhoeffer, this is especially evident in the persecution and suffering of the church: in the church, “we take part in Christ’s suffering and glory.”¹⁴⁵ It is not that each individual Christian is necessarily called to suffer; rather, the entire body of Christ suffers and some are permitted to suffer on behalf of the body. In a sense, this “vicariously representative action and suffering” is a *vocation* given to some of the members in order to serve the whole body of Christ.¹⁴⁶

Bonhoeffer also emphasizes the visibility of this community: “The body of Christ takes up physical space here on earth.”¹⁴⁷ Just as Christ himself

