

The mind in service of the Gospel of Christ.

Jessica: Welcome to Tangible, Theology Learned and Lived.
We are exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life.
Through conversations with various faculty here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ.
I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau.
I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics,
something different every episode,
but all pointing to the intersection between faith and daily life,
where it's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.
In the spring of 2023,
I spoke with two of our professors here,
Dr. David Maxwell and Dr. Erik Herrmann.
We talked about the role that the law plays in honest repentance.
Honest Repentance is a sermon series that Dr. Maxwell wrote.
I was fortunate enough to hear him preach all of the sermons live.
He preached them at my church.
The reaction was incredible.
My friends were asking for recordings because they wanted to hear the sermons again.
So in response to that,
we made a series of videos and podcast episodes with Dr. Maxwell.
You can find links to it all on our website.
The conversation today focuses on the first of those sermons.
He titled it simply Law.
I found Dr. Maxwell's insights incredibly tangible and powerful.
I hope that you do too.
Dr. Maxwell, you recently wrote a series of sermons exploring the ways in which
our understanding of the law, of faith,
of salvation all influence our ability to repent.
You called this series Honest Repentance.
What do you mean by that?
What do you mean by honest repentance?

David: Well, what I mean by honest repentance is that we should be in a place where
we're comfortable being honest before God,
and even honest with ourselves about who we really are,
as opposed to feeling like we have to hide from God.
So if you recall in Genesis,
Adam and Eve both hid from God,
and that's the fundamental human reaction when we're confronted with our sin.
But as Christians, we don't want to be like that.
We want to actually be able to be honest about who we are.

Erik: So David, can you give me an example of,
I mean you used Adam and Eve,
but what's an example of hiding?
When a Christian is not repenting in honesty or is hiding,
can you give me an example of that?

David: Well, you could try to maybe not think about your sin
too much.

Erik: Okay.

David: That would be one way,
and there's all very subtle ways that one might do this such
as,
I'm going to confess the socially acceptable sins,
but I'm not going to, that way it's like a smoke screen,
so I don't have to think about what really-

Jessica: Right. I always say gossiping.
When we talk about sins, yes.
My great fault is that I'm just a gossip.

Erik: Right. It's like in a job interview where you say,
my weakness is that I'm too committed.

David: Or another way might be that you're so
embarrassed by your sin that you can't even admit it to
yourself, much less to God.
I mean, that's a pretty serious situation,
and that I also have in view,
you don't want to hide in that way either.

Erik: Right. Hide from yourself in that sense.
So you had a great actually opening story in
your sermon on this topic from Mark Twain actually.
Could you recap that for us? That was great.

David: Yeah. Well, this is in Mark Twain's autobiography.
He tells this story of how he once saw a man shot in the
street,
and then he says that he had nightmares about it.
But one of the interesting things about the nightmare was
that it featured the Bible.
The Bible in question was one of these really big family
Bibles,
and someone had taken it and spread it out on the man's
chest.
Twain says that some idiot put it there because presumably
the guy thought,
oh, well, it's the Bible,
so that should help heal him.
But the problem was it's this huge book,
and the guy had been shot.
So the weight of the book actually made it harder for him to
breathe.
So Twain tells a story and then he makes a turn and he says,
in my nightmares, I gasped and struggled for breath
many a night under the crush of that vast book.

Jessica: Crushed by the law so that you can't breathe. What an image.

David: So the images as he develops it,
the images that the Bible is like an anvil on your chest that
crushes the life out of you.

Erik: Viewing Christianity and religion as a whole as primarily about pressing you down and crushing you. So one place to just even think about the law is actually right at the beginning. Genesis 1, you were describing in the sermon, just the first couple of days of creation as a springboard for thinking about the law, which is not to me intuitive. I would run straight to Mount Sinai or something like that to talk about the law. But why did you start with Genesis 1 and what are you trying to get across?

David: Well, with Genesis, what I'm getting across is that God establishes boundaries in Genesis and the law establishes boundaries for human behavior. So there is a certain similarity between what's going on in Genesis 1 and what's going on on Mount Sinai. And if you look at Genesis 1, the first three days of creation, you have God separating things. He separates the light from the darkness. He separates the waters from the waters. So what's he doing there? He's actually opening up space in which life can flourish. So where does he put all the life? It's in that space between the waters and the waters. In day two, he separates the waters from the waters. He installs the sky to keep the waters above away from the waters below. So that's where the space is that he puts the fish and the birds and the land animals and Adam and Eve. And if you didn't have that boundary, then you just have watery chaos and there'd be no possibility for life. Except maybe for the fish, I don't know. But we wouldn't be able to breathe. And you see this kind of language elsewhere in the Bible too, that God has set a boundary for the sea and that there is a sense repeated throughout the Bible that particularly the sea has a boundary that God establishes.

Erik: And the boundary is there for the sake of making life possible or life even to flourish rather than suppress or oppress, which is the picture of the heavy book that's pressing down. So the law as something that is for life. Why is that important about repentance? I mean, why do we need to know about the law as a boundary that makes space for living? And how does that help with repentance?

David: I think the fundamental issue is bitterness. What I mean by that is if you think that the law is arbitrary, that God's rules are arbitrary, they're designed to restrict you, restrict your humanity, crush the life out of you or however you want to say it. And let's say you're still a Christian and you're trying to obey God's law anyway because God is omnipotent

and you don't really have any standing to object to his arbitrary rules so you kind of go along with it. Well, what's going to happen?

It seems to me that over your lifetime you're going to accumulate bitterness and resentment towards God because you're not really convinced that these rules that you're outwardly trying to obey are actually for your good.

Erik: Yeah. So you're kind of suffering under arbitrary law with ultimately no gain or no benefit or no hope even, I suppose.

David: Right.

Jessica: And you can know that but not feel it.

Right. I can completely say God's rules are good.

I want to follow them because they are good for me.

But I might not feel that because subconsciously, right?

David: Absolutely.

Jessica: I'm still angry at them.

I'm still fighting against them because I haven't thought about it specifically.

David: Yeah. Well, and thinking about it and knowing it on a gut level are two different things.

Right. I mean, you can intellectually acknowledge that God's law is right and still feel angry at the restriction.

And so it seems to me that one of the things we need to do in the church is, in a sense,

make the case that God's law is actually for our benefit because, and I don't know, I mean,

maybe we're too pious even to consider this possibility that like, yeah, we're going to really talk about that.

What if Christianity is not good for you?

You know, because I think people feel, I certainly, people in society feel that way.

Mark Twain obviously felt that way.

Erik: Right.

David: And I think, you know, maybe a lot of people in society and even in the church may feel that way.

And so how do you overcome that?

Well, you have to kind of make the case.

And I don't just mean make the case intellectually.

I mean actually try and help people feel that God's law is good for you.

And so that's why I went to Genesis and not Mount Sinai.

Because I'm not just going to, I'm not just exegeting, here's a command and here's how it's good for you.

But it's like, look, there's this whole pattern of behavior, of God setting boundaries, which

on an intuitive level, yeah, you know that the boundary between the waters is a good

thing because you don't want to drown.

And so if you think of it in those terms, I think it becomes easier to actually have

your gut line up with your head in terms of acknowledging that God's law is good.

Yeah, you kind of have to work through it.

And it's not just a matter of checking off.

So this is one of the things I teach my students in systematic theology that don't think of theology as a checklist of true statements. You know, they are true statements, but it's this organic whole where each of the parts are all related to each other. And it's not sufficient just to say, you know, my goal is to believe as many true statements as I can.

No, I mean, you have to sort of get it.

You have to get the whole and understand how the parts relate.

And it seems to me that that's true on both a rational level and also on a, you know, if you want to say unconscious level or gut level.

Erik: Yeah, and that's an internal perception and an external perception.

I think people like you were saying with Mark Twain can look at the law, look at religion as primarily a negative.

It reminds me of this Joy Davidman, who eventually married C.S. Lewis, wrote a devotional text on the Ten Commandments called Smoke in the Mountain.

And she has this great line in there.

She's talking about how people are perceiving God as kind of a buzzkill, really.

She says that God is a source of our comfort and joy.

He's the source of all pleasures.

He is fun and laughter, and we're meant to enjoy him.

Otherwise, we shall try to be negatively good and make a virtue out of misery, plume ourselves

on the rejection of delights for which we are too weak, measure our piety by the number

of pleasures we prohibit, and others will react against us by rejecting religion altogether, probably pronouncing with pride that they are choosing life instead.

St. Augustine phrased the Christian law as have charity and do what you like.

The modern materialist often makes it simply do what you like and then rushes off to ask

his psychoanalyst why he no longer seems to like anything.

So I think one of the questions is when we're talking about that the law is for life and

for human flourishing, what do we mean by human flourishing?

Is it just being happy?

David: Yeah.

Well, that's a great question.

And I think that people are tempted to think that, right?

So if you say flourishing, then does that mean everything's going my way?

And what about Christians who are really struggling?

And so there, I think you have to bear in mind that Jesus also says, pick up your cross

and follow me and that there is no guarantee in the Bible that your life is going to be happy even.
In fact, quite the opposite.
There's the suggestion that there is suffering in life that you need to endure.
And so how do you kind of match that with human flourishing?
And what I would say is what you really want is purpose and not necessarily happiness.
And that's not a particularly Christian observation.
You can see psychologists on YouTube will make this point too.
But I think it's right.
And I think that it's, you think about Luther.
So one of the things that Luther really stressed, well, what is it that makes you a theologian?
It's the suffering.
I mean, he used the word *tentatio* in Latin, but that refers to kind of the suffering that you undergo in your life.
And his was pretty severe.
And I mean, you know more about Luther than I. Maybe you want to talk about that.
But it was, you know, that's a fundamental part of Lutheran tradition.

Erik:

Yeah.
Well, and then you have the question, like you read the Psalmist and they wonder why here they are sort of following God's law and being righteous.
And yet the wicked who spurn it and make fun of it seem to be flourishing while they are suffering or being oppressed.
And so I think that's a good point is that happiness can't be necessarily the key for a couple of reasons.
One is you define happiness just by sort of fulfilling all of your pleasures and desires.
But also because we live in a broken world in which you don't get necessarily what you want.
And even if you do the right thing doesn't mean you're necessarily going to be rewarded with justice.
So purpose points you towards maybe what you're made for, what you ought to do in this world for one another and in relationship to God.
So how does the scriptures define purpose for, or how does the law define purpose?

David:

Well here, I think the real Lutheran contribution to this discussion is the doctrine of vocation.
So you have the commands, the 10 commandments let's say, which tell you God's will.

And so that's going to set the boundaries, those are the boundaries like you shall not murder.

Okay well I think we probably all agree that's a pretty good limitation on human behavior because we wouldn't want to live in a society where everyone thought it was just fine to go out and kill your neighbor.

Jessica: The world wouldn't last very long.

David: No it wouldn't last very long.

Erik: The DMV would be just a complete, you know, trademark. But then you kind of couple that with the doctrine of vocation which says that you have certain callings in life, whether that's in the family or in the church or at work.

So you can be a father, a mother, a child, an employee, an employer, you can be a ruler, you can be a subject.

And there is a sense in which those responsibilities involve suffering because you have to carry out your responsibility.

If you're going to be a good boss let's say, then you have to treat your employees fairly, you have to pay them right, you have to do all the paperwork. I mean there's all kind of...

Erik: You have to give up something of your own life and pleasure.

David: You have to give up something of yourself.

The doctrine of vocation says that you accept these responsibilities and the suffering that goes with them.

Why do you do it?

Because this is how you carry out the Ten Commandments.

I mean so for example, back to the fifth commandment, you shall not murder.

In the small catechism, the commandment is...

Luther describes the meaning of the commandment.

Not only is it you don't hurt nor harm your neighbor, but also that you help and befriend him in every bodily need.

So you're supposed to help your neighbor according to the fifth commandment in Luther's explanation.

Well how do you help your neighbor?

Well it depends.

Is your neighbor an infant?

Who's your child?

Is the neighbor your employer?

I mean those relationships have different sets of responsibility attached to them and those are defined by the doctrine of vocation.

And so one way to think about meaning and purpose in life is that you're actually carrying out those responsibilities in service to the other people around you.

Erik: Yeah.

It makes me think also when we're talking about life, it almost sounds like life in a biological sense also includes the correct kind of working together of different parts for the sake of the whole.

So human flourishing can't happen just within an individual caring only about himself.

It actually happens when this broader context, life is actually relationships and obligations to one another and it's in those contexts that actually there's give and take that's going on.

So yeah we're living in a society that is highly individualistic and if they took it to its logical conclusion could really cancel out possibility of life and human flourishing.

So this is really helpful.

David: Can I just say one more thing about the doctrine of vocation? And that is Luther in using that term made a move in the sense that the term vocation originally referred to your calling to be a monk or a priest or something like that.

So it was this like holy churchy sort of thing and what Luther is doing by saying well being a father or mother is also a vocation that that becomes a holy calling.

So it sort of sanctifies all of Christian life.

And it gives Lutheran theology a much more this worldly kind of piety.

So in other words if in medieval monasticism and as an early church guy I can tell you

even more in early church monasticism that there is often this sense that what you're

trying to do is to escape your body and you're ascending to heaven by contemplation and you're

trying to suppress as much as you possibly can including the desire for sleep and food

as much as you can.

You want to suppress that in order to attain to this higher spiritual sort of contemplation

and it seems to me that Lutheran piety is kind of goes in the opposite direction.

That what it does is it drives you out into the world with this set of responsibilities

defined by your vocation and that's how you live out your Christian life.

So it doesn't have to be an explicitly kind of churchy thing in order to be serving God.

Erik: Yeah the move the direction away from the world is again we've had a history of that within monasticism but it's also a picture.

David: But it's not only monasticism too I mean you can see this in American Protestantism as well.

Erik: Yeah.

David: So I have a friend who once he was an accounting teacher at a Christian college and it wasn't a Lutheran college but he was teaching an accounting class and he asked the kids well what career do you want to pursue and one of the boys in the class said well I guess I'll have to be a camp counselor. And so the professor says you're an accounting major why do you feel like you have to be a camp counselor and his answer was well it's the only God pleasing career I can think of. Okay so that would be an example of someone who doesn't understand the doctrine of vocation that doesn't understand that the different callings in life that you have that is how you please God. It doesn't have to be an explicitly church vocation.

Erik: No that's very good.

Jessica: As a past camp counselor though let's throw under that it doesn't mean that it's bad and that it can also be fun it doesn't need to be a painful vocation for it to count.

Erik: So back to repentance it sounds like as you think about your relationship to these boundaries that have created space for life and our inclination at times to push against them to transgress them now we see that we actually are pushing against things that are actually healthy and wholesome and it makes the repentance more what is it authentic? Is it more poignant? Is it motivated differently when you see the law this way as for our good rather than like you said an arbitrary boundary? What does it do to the repentance? What does it do for our way of thinking about our sin?

David: I think if you understand the law in that way it sort of helps you want to be repentant. So let me just give you an example. I've heard plenty of sermons in which the pastor will say something like we shouldn't do X just pick a sin right? But we all do it anyway as if it's a little picadillo and we kind of chuckle at ourselves that we're so silly but then Jesus forgives us. So it seems to me that if you think about sin as a little picadillo that you chuckle at yourself for well that's not a real motivation to avoid sin in the future because it's really no big deal. Whereas if you do what Paul does in Romans 7 and I always use Romans 7 as an example

here is Paul raises the issue of well should we sin that grace may abound and twice actually in the chapter and in the middle of the chapter his solution is to say don't you know that you're slaves to whoever you obey. So he doesn't say like oh we're going to tone down the grace so that I can threaten you a little bit more. No he just points out look sin is slavery. Do you want to be a slave to sin and death? I mean so part of it is that I think as a church we need to portray sin in a way that's actually viscerally horrifying and not as just this little thing we chuckle at.

Erik: Yeah.

David: And that way to hear that you're free from sin both in terms of forgiveness of sins but then also sanctification.

Erik: The possibility.

David: The possibility that your life could be different. That's also good news if you think sin is something you really want to run away from. But I think the benefit of thinking about God's law as this is for your good and you're playing with fire and you're pushing against a wall that if it comes down the whole house might come down on your head. The benefit of describing sin like that is to help you understand how bad sin is and to help you kind of on a gut level realize no you may think you want to sin because that's the nature of temptation right but you don't really want that.

Erik: Yeah.

And that makes repentance as something that you really like you said want to do when you think of repentance it seems like an unpleasant to reflect upon your own sin to confess your own sin to really deal with the problem that you have is an exhausting unpleasant experience but it all of a sudden becomes this thing that you would rather do rather enter into than endure the possibility of sin breaking me totally.

David: Yeah.

Jessica: So you said you were making bridges in your sermon you said the walls are making space for you to live in and if you knock them down.

David: Yeah so I did use after I talked about God making the separating the waters from the waters to create space where life can flourish I said look well we do this too. And in a sense it shouldn't be surprising because we're created in the image of God

and so we imitate this boundary making activity and if you think about it what is a house it's like a little artificial sky.

So it's actually very similar to day two of creation we've installed a sky that that keeps the waters above away from our living space so that we can live.

Right.

And but what would happen if we if we view our own boundaries as arbitrary and restrictive and start knocking out walls and windows of your own house. Well that's obviously stupid.

Right.

I mean you start knocking walls down and pretty soon you're going to be sitting in a pile of rubble.

No one would do this because but people do it when it comes to God's law because they don't think about God's law in the same way as this structure in which God is designed.

Here's how you're supposed to live here's how I designed you. And if you kind of go your own way what you're risking is you're heading into chaos.

Erik: I think that's a helpful analogy although knocking down a support wall is a pretty obvious way to bring about destruction on your own house. I think some of some of our sins we can see as having obvious negative consequences more easily than others.

There's there's also though and you mentioned this too there's there's a sense in which sin can be quite subtle in our life.

And he used that that famous quote by Thoreau that the mass of the lives of men are lived out in quiet desperation which is a much more subtle experience and maybe a way of hiding without really knowing it.

You want to speak a little bit about the difference between a Christian who has avoided the explicit sins that are obviously destructive but also the subtle way in which sin can undermine a life.

David: Yes well the the quiet desperation point is.

Jessica: You had said that that was a hint that something was wrong.

David: A hint that something was wrong.

Yeah.

And that basically the idea is well where is this vague sense of longing coming from.

You sort of know on an intuitive level that something is wrong.

Well what's wrong.

Well it may be a hint that what's wrong is that you're living out of step with the way

God designed you and the way that he designed the universe.

And so it may not be that the house is coming crashing down around your ears you know because it's a more subtle kind of thing. But it still could be a hint that there's maybe a wound in your soul or something like that that that repentance is a way of reflecting on and kind of addressing and and realizing that OK well you know maybe maybe there is a way in which I'm out of step with God which of course there is. I mean our own doctrine of original sense is like we're all like this.

So this shouldn't be surprising to anyone.

Erik: Yeah I mean externally you could have and even to yourself you could have a life that seems to be going quite well and sort of fits the definition of human flourishing from a variety of standards and yet still have this sort of deep hole.

David: And this is the kind of thing that I think makes people want to hide because well I shouldn't be feeling this way because everything's going fine. And yet I do and I don't know why. So I'm just going to keep up the facade and and kind of try to hide and not really address this because I because somehow I feel like it doesn't make sense. Quote I think of as Augustine's famous quote about our hearts are restless until we find our rest in you.

Erik: And so that's an indicator the restlessness of a heart is an indicator that maybe we've been resting on things that don't satisfy right. Taking our or taking our satisfaction in things that that are temporary or fleeting and we're starting to feel that we're starting to experience that.

Jessica: So the sermon is called Law. God has created space with law for us to live in. Where does that fit into the context of the gospel and grace?

David: Well the the problem I suppose of kind of laying out this vision of human flourishing is when you when you realize well I can't do that. You know I mean it's too big of a project right. Because you don't have the resources to overcome to fill your own emptiness much less to overcome condemnation and death you know which are the results of sin in Genesis where because of what I referred to there in the sermon was the curse in Genesis 3 where God says dust you are to dust your return because it was you know so that's that's the curse that all humans labor under.

Erik: We're all sitting in rubble in that sense.

David: Yeah we are all sitting in rubble and that's and that's why you know the law by itself is not going to deliver you from it. It's the purpose of describing the law that way is maybe to inspire you to kind of want to live in a God pleasing way but it isn't going to get you there.

It's the gospel that's going to move you in that direction.

Erik: And how does the gospel move you in that direction?

David: Well so I find it helpful.

So there's a book by Adolf Koberle called The Quest for Holiness right that is kind of the standard Lutheran treatment of sanctification and Koberle makes the point that sin has a twofold effect.

Sin condemns you but sin also has power over your life it binds you I think is the term that he uses.

And so the death and resurrection of Christ also has a corresponding twofold effect.

It delivers you from the condemnation of sin which we call justification in Lutheran theology

but it also delivers you from the binding power of sin which we call sanctification.

And so both of those things are the result of the death and resurrection of Christ.

Now in terms of sanctification that's not like a hundred percent complete like justification

is because when you're forgiven of your sins all of them are forgiven there's nothing that's left undone to be done.

But in sanctification that's a process of growth through your whole life so it's not

that you're going to go from sitting in rubble to sitting in a like perfectly manicured palace

of God's law or something like this.

No it's a you move more and more into the space where God has designed where life flourishes.

Jessica: Is sanctification part of the purpose?

You said that it wasn't being happy but it was giving us purpose.

Can you talk more about how those are connected?

David: Yeah well sanctification the word just means being made holy.

And so being made holy would be synonymous with living more and more in accordance with

God's law.

And so if God's law is laying these responsibilities on you in the doctrine of vocation that gives

you a purpose you're going to serve your neighbor and you're going to do it in this way depending

on your vocation.

Well then yeah sanctification is tied up in the question of purpose in life.

But I mean let's say you're a Christian and a new Christian a convert and you want to know well what should I do to live a Christian life? Should I I don't know fast and pray all day? Should I go on a pilgrimage to Rome in a suit of armor? I mean what is it?

Erik: Should I be a camp counselor?

David: Yeah something like that.

Yeah what what is it that pleases God?

Well the law can actually tell you it gives you the sketch of what a God pleasing life looks like.

And so this language about the law as defining a space in which life can flourish I suppose that fits under the third use better than it does the other two.

Jessica: So this whole conversation is about honest repentance and the first part talking about the law.

So you have this law that's crushing you like a book on your chest while you're dying.

So what can we do?

How could you how could you find honest repentance?

David: Well clearly if you think that you're honest about your sin and you're going to be condemned for it and that's all you think.

Jessica: Then why would you want to be honest about it?

David: Why would you want to be honest about it right?

Right I mean so the thing that that has to be there is the gospel.

So Christ actually you know I mentioned this curse, dust you are to dust you return.

And I do think that this is the best way to think about the human condition across like throughout the whole Bible is that is the curse that everything is controlled by.

That we're under this we labor under it.

Our physical death is a direct result of this curse which is because of sin.

And so what Christ does is he comes and he dies.

Well what does it mean that he dies?

It means that he stood under that curse and now he said no I'm going to take it.

It's going to apply to me.

And so you might say that he allowed his own body to return to dust instead of Adam's.

Except for one thing only three days later he raises his body from the dead.

He rises from the dead.

And three days is not long enough for your body to decompose.

And there is a psalm that is applied to Christ you will not let your holy one see decay.

So this does seem to be kind of an important part of the biblical witness that Christ died

in our place but he didn't decay in our place.
He didn't go all the way to dust.
He rose from the dead and restored life and salvation of the
human race.

And that is what makes honest repentance possible.

Jessica: That's it for today.

I'd like to thank our guests Dr. David Maxwell and Dr. Erik
Herrmann for being on the show.

Thanks guys.

If you want to see the Honest Repentance video series or the
printed publication of Dr. Maxwell's

sermons check out our website ConcordiaTheology.org.

You can find more episodes of Tangible on all the major
hosting apps or on our website

which again is ConcordiaTheology.org.

If you'd like to see the show continue please subscribe,
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I'm your host and producer Jessica Bordeleau.

Join me next time.

I'll talk with a father of seven children Dr. Kevin Golden
about the lessons he learned

from his father.

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Theology Learned and Lived.