Well, as I promised for this season of Lent I’m beginning a 5 week series on Lutheran doctrine, or what we believe. I’ve never preached theology in my career but I’m going to try it for 5 weeks. Just a couple of remarks before I start. We all do theology. The most common theology that I hear is what is sometimes is called a bar code faith. Every item that you scan at Walmart has a bar code, or should. And you scan the bar code to purchase that product. The most common theology that I hear is a bar code faith. And the idea is that when you die, what’s going to happen is that God is somehow going to open your head and see if you have the right beliefs. It’s called a theology of correctness. It’s exactly like knowing the password for your computer. I believe that Christ died for my sins. Ok, you can get in. Most Christian theology seems to be about how to get to heaven. Not this theology.

Which leads to my next point. Which is that all theology is imperfect. A theology of correctness, or bar code faith, is more flawed than most, but there is no church that has the correct theology. Most of us have heard the phrase, “if you want to make God laugh, tell ‘im your plans”. Well, you can add to that, “if you really want to make God laugh, tell ‘im your theology”. Don’t expect perfection. Steer clear of that church or that guy on TV that presents their beliefs as if they’re right and everybody else is wrong. The last thing I want to do is present Dr. Martin Luther or Lutheran doctrine as if, it is perfection. Far from it. Nevertheless I think that our theology has so much to offer that opens up a powerful life with God, and so I will do my best to present some of it here in the next few weeks.

Today I want to focus on what Lutheran theology calls the Law. The phrase that best captures this theology I will put up on the screen here. This is from Romans 3:28. “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the Law.” There is a lot of God’s law in the Bible. Books and books of it. Most of us know about the 10 commandments. And the purpose of the law is two-fold in the Lutheran tradition. The first use of the law is called the Civil use of the Law. Here, the purpose of law is to restrain evil and sin. That’s why we have law enforcement, and courts and judges, to enforce civil law. As civil law, the 10 commandments restrain sin. They sort of keep you in line. Sin, is breaking a law. But the second use of the law is what is called the theological use of the law. And here the law becomes something much different. Here, the law becomes a curse. Evil. We read from Galatians Chapter 3 verse 10. For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse…. so in the theological use of the law, sin is not breaking the law, it’s a actually a way of following the law that is the problem.

The way I’m going to start is by looking at the how this issue presents itself in the book Galatians. As you could see from our lesson this morning from, the writer of this letter, the Apostle Paul, is absolutely furious with this church. These people have totally lost their connection to God. Something has happened that has cursed them. It’s hard to find anywhere else Paul talking like this. I am astonished that you have turned to a different Gospel. And anyone who does what they are doing is cursed. So this is really bad. What has happened?

Here’s the issue. God’s chosen people up until this point were the people of Isreal, or the Jews. Grounded in the call to Abraham. And to mark themselves as having received this blessing, they were branded so to speak with a mark. The mark was called circumcision. Now I won’t go into all the details about this, I assumed you know what circumsicion is, and that yes it is a bit sexist and a mark of our patriarchal past, (that’s for another day), but circumcision was the sign of the blessing that they had received from God. Circumcision was a blessing. It was life! It was promise! You are mine, you are my chosen, I will make you a great people. Can’t have a much better blessing. I love you, you are my people. You are a member of my family and meant to be blessing. Circumcision represented a gift. You’re a member of the family.

Well, here is what has happened. This is a church of non-Jewish people call the Gentiles. And Paul has come to them with the blessing that up until now had only been for the Jews. This is the Good News that this Good News, meant for the Jews is now for them. They are chosen by God, blessed with his promises in Jesus Christ. Now they don’t need to be circumcised, because they are not Jews. They don’t have to follow the Mosaic Law. But guess what? Here come a bunch of Jews to this church saying that they have to be circumcised in order for them to be in the family. And this church is falling for it. Paul is livid.

Do you see what’s happened? At first is doesn’t seem like much. What’s the big deal? Why is Paul so crazy mad? Who cares about circumcision? But once you see it, once you get it, it gets real clear. These people have turned the Gospel, the Good News, a blessing, a gift into the Law. Do you see that? This is everything. These people have turned God’s blessing into a have to. And that’s how God’s law gets turned into a curse. That’s how the law works, right? You have to this, you have to do that. They’ve turned a blessing into a have to. And in an instant, the focus shifts from God and what God has done, to themselves and what they have to do. And this is a curse, and it’s for real.

Have you ever turned a blessing into a have to? I remember when I went to Tanzania, (we had a pastor exchange here a while back) and I spent 7 week in Tanzania. And one of the things I did there was spend a little time at some local schools, and talked with a few kids who spoke English. And the thing that struck me about it was how glad they were to be in school. They were overwhelmed with the sense of going to school as a blessing. They knew what a gift it was. Even when it was hard. They thanked God that they could go to school. And then you come back to this country, and I remember what school meant to me a lot of the time. Ugh. What a drag. I have to do this, I have to do that. They make me do this. They make me do that. You just turned a blessing into a curse. The blessing of an education. The Law takes it and turns it into a curse. Sucks all the life right out of it. That’s what sin is, and that’s what we’re in bondage to.

Take the reality of our baptism. What a blessing. A sign of all that God has done for us. I love you, you are my chosen, I died for you, I promise to bring you life. I am filling you with the breath of my Spirit. Welcome to the family. What a blessing. But somehow we can turn it into a curse. Now it’s “I have to get baptized” or you know what. That’s the curse of the law. You just took God’s greatest blessing and turned it into a curse. Sucked the life right out of it. Do you see why Paul is so angry? We can do it with communion. Now I have to do it, or I won’t be forgiven. It’s typically done with believing. What a blessing to believe. What gift from God, to learn to trust? But someone out there will show up in your life and tell you have you have to believe. Or else. Put you right under the curse. How many of us have fallen for that one. They’ll shift the focus from God has done, to what you need to do, as fast as you can snap your fingers. You can take your entire church and put it under the curse of the law. Now it’s just duty, this obligation, a list of have to’s. And you walk in there and place is all contentious and you wonder why. It’s cursed. I had one lady in my last call tell me, “I go to church, because I’m afraid of what will happen if I don’t”. Where’s God? Where is the blessing running through my veins? Where is the freedom? Where is the promise? It can just all disappear and now it’s just all about what we have to do.

I’m just scratching the surface here, just barely getting into how the law can curse us. You can take anything and suck the life right out it. That beautiful girl you married. Those days filled with promise. Remember that? What a blessing, what a gift. She chose you. It was a miracle. Fix her car, do anything for her. Now it’s, uh, she’s ragging on me to take out the trash. Now she’ just my ball and chain. You’re under the law, man. That’s what sin does. That’s the curse. It’s a horrible reality. That’s why Paul is so angry, do you get it now? The gift became a have to. The blessing becomes a burden. Those old Lutherans, they had a point to make that is maybe worth hearing.

This can be confusing if you believe that sin is primarily about breaking the law. Misbehaving. No. that’s not it, that’s a misunderstanding in this tradition. Thou shalt not steal. Sin is stealing. Breaking the Law. No. No. Stealing is a sin to be sure, but thinking about sin only as breaking the law really misses the point badly. And the reason for that is very simple. You can follow the law and still be under the law. Your just following because you have to. Your supposed to. That’s very important. We all know this problem. You’d rather not, but you do it because you’re supposed to. In the church that leads to what? Self-righteous religious people. All these people who are following the law, and who look down their nose at the law breakers. And who think they are so superior. And that really is sin and a curse on an entire way of life. Breaking the law is a civil problem. That’s external, that’s behavior. Being under the law is a theological problem. I’m under threat, the fear of punishment. I just do it because I have to. “Cause I’m supposed to. So I don’t end up in hell, or something. I’m under the law. God’s law meant to bring life, takes it away.

This is why we need God. We’re imprisoned, the under the law. The teacher leaves the room and the kids start screwing around. But they post a monitor at the door to look for the teacher coming back. Suddenly the lookout sees the teacher and says, “Shh, the teacher is coming”. And all the kids run back to their desks and get out there books and start doing their work like perfect angels. Teacher walks in and everyone is a perfect saint. Nope. Not for a Lutheran. That is the perfect definition of sin. You’re under the law. Under the curse. We need a Savior who will liberate us from this kind of childishness and lead us to freedom. And taking that journey of being freed from the curse of the law is what following Jesus is all about. Learning to be free.

Ok. That’s just a little bit about law. Next week I’ll tackle justification. What God can do for us. Just getting started on a theology here. Blessings.