

## THE GREAT DIVIDE

It no longer seems very strange when I am told that there is a Continental Divide. It comes into our country at the border between Waterton Lakes National Park and Glacier National Park. It goes down through Yellowstone and the Rocky Mountains, and I am told it runs all the way through Panama and down to the tip of South America. There are some places where we can reach this great divide without being mountaineers. On Highway 160, for instance, in Southern Colorado near Wolf Creek Pass, you can get out of your car and stand right on top of the Continental Divide. I was in sixth or seventh grade when one of our family outings took us past this point. Dutifully our parents stopped, we all got out of the car, and they explained that if you poured a cup of water on one side, it would run into the Atlantic Ocean, and if you poured a cup of water on the other side, it would go into the Pacific Ocean.

I do not remember how much we mused about such mysteries after we drove on, but I was impressed. And I have thought many times since of the many “great divides” we encounter in life.

There is a great divide between living life objectively and living life subjectively. One leads to an ocean of isolation, loneliness, caution, playing it safe. The other leads to an ocean of participation, relationships, caring, involvement, and endless problems.

There is a great divide between getting married and staying single, and there is an even greater divide between getting married and truly loving somebody. There is a great divide between getting a job and hearing a “calling” from God. There is a great divide between life in Christ Jesus and living my life by my own light and for my own purposes and desires.

One of the greatest Great Divides is between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. Some people think there is a smooth transition between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, but that certainly is not my experience. In my life it has been one of the Great Divides. I even muse about how much more land there is on the eastern side of the Continental Divide in comparison to how much there is on the western side, and how it took most of our forebears a long time to explore and settle all the land between the Atlantic Ocean and the Rocky Mountains – just as it took our ancestors a long time to explore

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the life of the Old Covenant before they even realized that there *was* a New Covenant and a whole different way to live.

Most of us are familiar with – or at least we think we are familiar with – the Great Divide between Law and Gospel. All of life is lived trusting in one or the other. But can we cross the divide between one and the other?

There are endless ways to encounter this divide, and from many different experiences. Some do it from the high peaks in the north, and others from the relatively tame landscape near the southern border. But there is no escaping the fact that we are heading for different oceans, depending on which side of this divide we are living on: Law or Gospel.

Never mind the big peaks for the moment: Do we trust the love of God, or are we still trying to prove our own value and worthiness? Are we ever truly forgiven, accepted, and invited, or are we always about to be thrown away if we cannot perform well enough to make ourselves look useful and valuable enough to be saved?

It is a huge topic. But for the moment, let us merely consider the motives – the reasons – we have for trying to do our good deeds. I do not know anybody who thinks we should stop trying to do good deeds. I do not know anybody who thinks God does not like it when we try to do good deeds. We may argue about which deeds are really good, and what is the good within them. Often we try to persuade others to do the good deeds *we* want them to do instead of the good deeds *they* want to do. But I do not know anybody who does not want to do good deeds.

Of course, I do know a few people who think we should be more careful and more thoughtful about our good deeds before we get entangled in trying to do them. I even know a few people who think we should be prayerful – that we should try to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit – before we even *attempt* to do good deeds. But such people are rare.

Nevertheless, most of us assume that God wants us to care – that God wants us to be compassionate and helpful to others. We even think God gives us abilities to make this possible, and that we each have a “calling” (if we can hear it) that will send us into our own particular purposes and endeavors, and will bring benefit to others and further the Life of the Kingdom.

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So what is the Great Divide when it comes to our efforts to do good deeds? I cannot always tell when I look at others, but I know the Great Divide when it comes to my own motives. Do I try to do good in the hope of receiving recognition? Of course yes, sometimes. Sometimes I try to do good in the hope that others will think better of me. Sometimes I try to do good in the hope that it will cause others to think better of the church. Sometimes I try to help, thinking it might improve somebody else's life or help them to get on a better track. And often (sorry) I have found myself trying to help others in the hope that it would ease my conscience – that it would help me not feel so guilty about having so much in the midst of a world so full of problems, suffering, and need. But it is clear to me that whenever I give for any of these reasons or motives, it is all heading toward the Atlantic Ocean; it is all trying to serve the Old Covenant; it is all trying to store up some merit or value or righteousness for me. Deep inside I still think I will need that. How can I store up a little merit – a little buffer – against the day when I too will be thrown away? Subtly but deep within, it is always operating.

But what if I cross the Great Divide and begin to believe the Gospel of mercy and grace already received? What if I cannot *earn* God's acceptance, because I have already received it? What if I cannot convince anybody that I am becoming more righteous, because "righteousness" itself has already been transformed into a different realm – a righteousness (as Paul says) based on God's love for me – and is not dependent on anything I will ever do to deserve it? Then what motive can there be for any good deeds that I will ever do? It is a whole new realm – a whole different ball game. The only motive left on the other side of the Great Divide is GRATITUDE. "*Freely you have received – freely give.*" (Matthew 10:8)

There are no ulterior motives in gratitude. Gratitude is a response to what has already been received – to what has already been given. Things given in gratitude do not need to control anybody. It no longer matters whether anybody thinks better of me, approves of what I am doing, or decides to consider me a "good Christian" because of what I am doing or what they think about why I am doing it. I have already received the approval and the love of a higher authority, and that is where the gratitude is coming from. It might be interesting, but it does not make any difference what results may come from our good deeds if they are done in gratitude. We do not give to get something; we give because we already got something. We no longer work to get the gift; we have the gift and therefore we work.

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By the way, that is why Christians feel a greater and greater desire to find their true vocatio. The urge to respond to the gratitude welling up within them gets stronger and stronger. “Please, Lord. I need some outlet for all the grace and mercy and love You have poured into me. I want to be part of what You are doing. Please give me a ‘calling’ – a task that matches my true identity and frame. I no longer want to be famous or successful or rich in this world. Your gifts far surpass all my old longings. But I so very much want some way to say ‘thank you.’ Any calling will do, Lord, as long as it comes from you. Please give me some way to express my gratitude.”

Gratitude leads to an entirely different ocean: the ocean of the Kingdom we are already in, and of the God who already loves us.

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The Great Divide between Law and Gospel is the most famous divide in our tradition. Paul, Augustine, and Luther all worked to make it absolutely clear and to keep it clear. Of course, that also makes it clear that many people were not clear about it, and that many who had it clear were forgetting it. Even in my own time, we have had a school of scholars claiming that Jesus never knew the Gospel – that He was just a gifted Jewish peasant who ran afoul of the Roman and Jewish authorities of His time, and that long afterward the Apostle Paul invented the Gospel of Grace. That Paul may have experienced the grace of the Risen Christ – to his own astonishment – does not seem to count much in such theories.

Maybe so, but I find that hard to reconcile with parables like the Prodigal Son or the Dishonest Steward. I find it even harder to reconcile with the way Jesus treated people – and with the Cross itself, because no matter how much we may misexplain or misunderstand the Cross, it still stands for an undeserved and undeservable grace and forgiveness.

So it still seems like a strange mystery, or at least a contradiction, that so much of Christendom is still trying to earn its way into God’s love and forgiveness. Especially so when we know that this makes us judgmental toward others, and way too hard on ourselves. Or to put it another way: Why are so many of us still prone to getting back on the wrong side of the Great Divide between Law and Gospel?

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Before this sermon ends, I actually want to talk about a different Great Divide. As we have said, there is more than one Great Divide. The Great Divide I want to talk about this morning is perhaps more obvious, yet more subtle, than any other in Christendom. And in some ways it may be more important and more divisive than the Great Divide between Law and Gospel. You do know that Great Divides have the potential for being divisive? That is always a sad part of the reality of our broken world. Not only is light different from darkness, but we always tend to choose sides and then fight over who is choosing which side and why.

So I'm wondering: Did you pick it up in the Scripture reading this morning? Communion is our most sacred meal, and the passage we read this morning is just one of the few places in the New Testament that is telling about this wondrous meal. Is it really telling about a Great Divide and we are skipping over that part? Well, maybe not all of you, but perhaps some of you have never seen this Great Divide or taken it much to heart.

This night – this Last Supper – is the last time Jesus will be with His disciples as a human being in this earthly life. All these years later, that may not seem very important or very dramatic to us. We are used to it. We have partaken of this meal many times in our lives, and we expect to participate in it many more times. Familiarity may not breed contempt, but it often takes the edge off of things. It is hard to stay awake and alert with even our greatest blessings if they come easily and frequently.

But this Last Supper is dramatic and important to Jesus. Jesus says point-blank that He has longed to eat this meal with His disciples. He has had to cheat a bit and move the meal up a day. It is Thursday night instead of Friday night – Thursday instead of the Sabbath. Jesus will be dead by Friday night. But community, the Disciple Band – His best relationships on earth – are more important to Jesus than we sometimes realize or remember. His earthly friendships are also His only hope for the continuation of His ministry and mission on earth. Those are not separate matters; they go together.

So we get focused on the meal itself and all of its symbols and what it means to us, and that's wonderful. But do we hear the strange note in what Jesus is feeling and saying? *“Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”*

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Where is *that* coming from? Do we ever stop and pay attention to that? Seems a little eerie, and leads into thoughts we do not easily or fully grasp.

When does the Kingdom of God come? I mean for you. Never mind the theories or what somebody else thinks should be the truth for you. When does the Kingdom of God come? Are you one of those Christians who has been waiting for two thousand years for the Second Coming that was supposed to happen within the lifetime of the first Christians? Are we among the many Christians who have put all the really important matters of life on hold, waiting for death to take us to the blessed realms beyond? When does the Kingdom of God come?

Oh my friends, this is another Great Divide, and it comes between the leadership of the Physical Jesus and the leadership of the Resurrected Jesus. It comes between the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. It comes between Easter and Pentecost. It comes between our reading or thinking about others who were faithful believers, and our becoming faithful believers ourselves. It comes between hearing about Jesus, and discovering for ourselves a love-bond between us and Jesus. It comes between taking this meal as a memorial to Jesus, and discovering that the presence of the Holy Spirit of Jesus is alive and with us – and eager to participate in every part of our lives that we are willing to make available and open to the Spirit’s influence.

Not many people cross this Great Divide. It seems to me that Jesus was doing everything He could think of to alert, to warn, and to prepare His disciples for the crossing of this Great Divide. He seems to be saying: “A lot of harsh things are going to happen. It will seem for a while like all is lost. You will be disoriented, in deep shock, and grief-stricken, and it will seem for a while that all hope and light is gone. But get ready for the crossing. You will have to learn how to recognize me in a different manner and in a different form. Remember me ... so you will have some chance to discern and recognize the marks, the qualities, the telltale signs of my presence when they come in a new and different guise. And be ready to follow me again – to come with me again – when I come in an even greater form than I have had among you up to now.” The Gospel of John and the Book of Acts are full of this.

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“We will still be doing what we have always talked about doing: forming faith families – inviting the lost and the spiritually hungry into a new and better WAY of Life. The world will still make things difficult. Satan will still be your Adversary, in some ways more than ever. It will still be imperative that you love and support each other. It will be especially necessary for you to find and follow my guidance in everything you do. But I will still be with you – far more and far closer than ever before.”

Oh yes indeed, a Great Divide. And if we do not know it and cross it, we have no inkling of what the Christian Life is really like or about. We have no real understanding of why Jesus came in the first place. We have no viable awareness or opportunity to know His love or to carry His Message in the endless labyrinth and confusion and new possibilities of the world we find ourselves in today.

There is a Great Divide between knowing Jesus in the flesh – a man from Galilee long years ago – and knowing Jesus as the Risen Christ: the Holy Spirit – alive and with us, and still leading us every moment of every day.

We come, then, to this sacred meal. But we should also know that as we partake of and share this meal together, we are also standing on the Greatest Divide in all Christendom.