

“The Bible in Two Words”

Deuteronomy 4:1-2; Romans 7:7-8:2 ¹

After my summer effort to summarize the major thrust of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures in ten sermons, I came across an article in *Christianity Today* with the title, “God’s Word in Two Words.”² I was intrigued by such a bold effort to summarize that went far beyond my own, so I read the essay with interest, guessing what the two words might be.

Your guesses about the two words have been good ones,³ but neither you nor I saw where Tchividjian was heading. I’ll eventually tell you what his words were, of course, but before I tell you, I want to take you on an imaginary journey, first to Louisville, Kentucky, and then to a village in ancient Israel.

Jill and I lived in Louisville for sixteen years, and Nathan and Anna both grew up there. Louisville is known for lots of things, but perhaps it is most famous for the Kentucky Derby, Louisville Slugger bats, and Muhammad Ali. Everybody in Louisville knows that Muhammad Ali grew up there. His house is a something of a shrine, huge boulevards are named for him, and an enormous museum stands on the riverfront to chronicle his achievements.

A colorful and controversial athlete, Ali is generally considered to be one of the greatest boxers of all time, being the first and only three-time lineal World Heavyweight Champion. *Sports Illustrated* declared Ali the “Sportsman of the Century”; the BBC crowned him the “Sports Personality of the Century”; and he was probably the first real celebrity-athlete in the modern sense of that term.⁴

In the years since he quit boxing, Ali has given himself to humanitarian enterprises as an expression of his Muslim faith, which he takes quite seriously. In an interview with *Reader’s Digest*, Ali told how he understands the ultimate goals of human life: “One day we’re all going to die, and God is going to judge us—[our] good deeds and bad deeds. If the bad outweighs the good, you go to hell. If the good outweighs the bad, you go to heaven.”⁵ Muhammad Ali is not alone in that understanding of how things work

It was Saturday morning, and the weather was fine. Jesus and His disciples were walking to the synagogue to worship, and their path took them through a field of ripe grain. Their walk had caused breakfast to seem long, long ago and far, far away, and so the disciples were snacking on some of the wheat as they walked along.

High on a hill overlooking the town, the Pharisees on watch had spotted the group on their Sabbath-Breaker Radar. They radioed to Pharisee Troopers down below, and quick as a wink, Jesus and His friends were stopped by several guys with blue-flashing lights. “Your disciples shouldn’t be doing that!” the patrol said ominously to Jesus. “It’s against the law to work by harvesting grain on the Sabbath.”

“Get real, guys,” Jesus said. “If you were up on things at all, you’d remember that there’s plenty of precedent for this. Moses made exceptions for such situations, and King David did

¹ A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on October 6, 2013.

² Tullian Tchividjian, “God’s Word in Two Words,” *Christianity Today*, September 2013, Vol. 57, No. 7, 34.

³ Your suggestions were: “I Am”; “Alpha & Omega”; “The Bible”; “Jesus Christ”; “Holy Spirit”; “Holy Ghost”; “He Lives”; “Risen Savior”; “Jesus Saves”; “God Loves”; “God Summons”; “God’s Word”; “I Believe”; “Love Everybody”; “Love God”; and “My God”; other suggestions included “Love”, “Forgiveness,” “Faith,” “God,” “Disciple,” “Eternal,” “Humanity,” “Light,” “Obey,” “Redemption,” “Trinity,” and “Trust.”

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_Ali

⁵ “Ali,” *Reader’s Digest* (December 2001), 93.

things even bolder than what we're doing. This is all quite petty, and you need to know that I, the Son of Man, am Master even of the Sabbath."

Well, the Pharisee Patrol had no idea what to say to that, so Jesus & Company just walked off and went on over to the synagogue, while the Keystone Cops radioed in to headquarters for further instructions. When they arrived at the synagogue, Jesus noticed a man whose hand was badly deformed and walked over to him.

Synagogue Security saw what Jesus was up to, and they stopped Him, saying, "There'll be no healing here, of all places, especially not on the Sabbath. Forget it, buster!"

Their attitude provoked Jesus, and He responded, "Listen, if you bozos had a sheep that fell into a well on the Sabbath, wouldn't you get it out? Sure you would. And a person is far more valuable than a sheep."

Jesus looked at the man with the deformed hand and said, "Stretch out your hand." When the man held his arm out toward Jesus, his hand became completely normal. It was just like the special effects from Hollywood, except that this wasn't a computer-generated illusion!

All of this made the Pharisees—who had set themselves up as the guardians of the Law—absolutely livid. They called an emergency meeting and began to develop a plan to put out a contract to get Jesus killed.

People who operate on the level of good deeds vs. bad deeds—like Ali and the Pharisees—really flip out about Jesus. They can't understand Him, and they resent His promise of forgiveness to sinners who haven't been keeping all their rules.

John Ortberg grew up in a church like that: "The church I grew up in had its boundary markers. A prideful or resentful pastor could have kept his job, but if ever the pastor was caught smoking a cigarette, he would've been fired. Not because anyone in the church actually thought smoking a worse sin than pride or resentment, but because smoking defined who was in our subculture and who wasn't—it was a boundary marker. . . .

"Boundary markers change from culture to culture, but the dynamic remains the same," Ortberg wrote. "**If people do not experience authentic transformation, then their faith will deteriorate into a search for the boundary markers that masquerade as evidence of a changed life.**"⁶ Boundary markers—those things that really have nothing to do with the Gospel but rather with how we mark off who's in our own group—are another way to talk about a "good deeds vs. bad deeds" approach to God.

One of my favorite courses to teach at the seminary was "The Psychology of Religious Experience," and one of the very first books I ever read about the psychology of religion—way back in 1969—was Gordon Allport's *The Individual and His Religion*.⁷ Gordon Allport was a psychologist who studied how people go about their "faithing," and he was the first to notice that there are two very different ways in which humans relate to their religious faith—whether they're Christians or not.

Allport noticed that some people wear their religion rather like a coat that they put on and take off as the occasion warrants, while other people's religious life is more like a persistent inner fire. Allport called the faith of the "Coat Folks" *extrinsic faith*, while he called the faith of the "Fire Folks" *intrinsic faith*. Whole books have been written on the differences between these two approaches, but let me try to summarize the differences in a couple of sentences.

⁶ John Ortberg, "True (and False) Transformation," *Leadership* (Summer 2002), 102.

⁷ Gordon Allport, *The Individual and His Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1960).

According to Allport, Extrinsic Faith is committed to “the letter of the law.” Persons who take this approach tend to experience life mostly as “black or white,” and they tend to be selfish, defensive, and judgmental. Folks who wear their religion like a coat wear it only when they think that doing so will help them accomplish other, non-religious goals, which are actually much more important to them. “**Coat Folks**” tend to think in terms of “us” and “them,” are suspicious of religious enthusiasm, and tend to be secretly afraid of God.

“**Fire Folks**,” on the other hand, are committed to “the spirit and the intent of the law” more than to “the letter of the law.” They view most situations as complex and nuanced rather than “black or white.” They tend to be flexible, creative, and thoughtful. Folks whose religion resembles an inner fire find that this fire is the organizing principle of their lives, rather than something peripheral or “tacked on.” They follow the precepts of their faith whether or not it’s convenient to do so. “Fire Folks” tend to view God as loving and forgiving, and they are passionate about their intense and personal relationship with God.

Which group do you think best describes the Pharisee Sabbath-Breaker Patrol? More importantly, which group do you think best describes you? One of the most fascinating stories in the New Testament is the account of how a very famous person switched groups, leaving the “Coat Folks” to join the “Fire Folks.” His name was Paul.

Paul began as one of the Pharisees. He studied at the religious “Harvard” of his day, and he was a “rising star” among the Blue-Law Gang. Paul was an accomplice when Stephen, one of the first Christians, was killed, and Paul literally held the coats of the “Coat Folks” while they set aside their extrinsic faith to commit murder. Soon after this, Paul “*began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison*” (Acts 8:3).

Like the other Pharisees, Paul thought that Jesus was destroying their boundary markers—which was true. Paul also thought that to destroy the boundary markers was to destroy the inner realities that the markers represented—which wasn’t true. It was this mistaken idea that caused Jesus to say, “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them*” (Matthew 5:17).

The Pharisees thought Jesus was destroying their law, because they understood it only as an external “coat.” Jesus told them that the purpose of the law had always been to bring them to Him.

And that brings us to Tchividjian’s two words that summarize the whole Bible. Are you ready? His two words were “LAW”⁸ and “GOSPEL”: “The **law** is God’s word of demand, and the

⁸ Much of what follows comes from D. Glenn Saul, “Law, Ten Commandments, Torah,” in *The Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991): “Law” is one of the primary concepts in the Bible. The word may be used to describe a commandment, a word, a decree, a judgment, a custom, or a prohibition. The Hebrew word most frequently translated as “law” in the Old Testament is “torah” (תּוֹרָה), used more than 200 times.⁸ The central idea of “torah” is that it represents God’s instruction about how to live. More particularly, “torah” represents the commandments God gave to the nation of Israel about how to live in covenant with God.

While the word, “Torah” is generally used by Christians to refer to the five books of Moses, “Torah” is much more than this to Jewish folk. For them, “Torah consists of the foundational narrative of the Jewish people: their call into being by God, their trials and tribulations, and their covenant with their God, which involves following a way of life embodied in a set of religious obligations and civil laws.”⁸ And today, as in the time of Jesus, “Torah” includes not just the words of Scripture, but also the various rabbinic commentaries on the words of Scripture, known as “the traditions of the elders” (Matthew 15:2), or the Talmud.

Jesus was both a supporter of the Law and a critic of it. While Jesus was frequently critical of the oral traditions of the elders, setting His own teachings over against them,⁸ He was also very clear that He had not come to destroy God’s Law as given through Moses, but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17-20). Time and

gospel is God's word of deliverance.⁹ **The law tells us what to do, while the gospel tells us what God has done.**¹⁰

"If you pick up your Bible and turn to any page," Tchividjian writes, "you're going to find one of two things: either a passage that demands something from you (Law), like *Honor your father and your mother* (Exodus 20:12), or a passage that delivers something to you (Gospel), like *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life* (John 3:16, ESV). Everything in [the Bible] comes in one of these two forms."¹¹

After Paul met Jesus in the famous vision on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-23), he began to understand how the law really worked, and here's what he wrote: "*I felt fine when I did not understand what the law demanded. But when I learned the truth, I realized I had broken the law and was a sinner, doomed to die*" (Romans 7:9, NLT).

Paul's experience was very much like what happened to Bill Wimmer on a warm summer night in Arkansas. I think I may have told you this story before, but it's worth hearing again. Bill, his wife, and their three year-old son, Micah, were traveling at night, and they had collected quite a bit of bug goo on the windshield. When they stopped at a traffic light, the light revealed all the dead bugs, and Micah cried out, "Look, how dirty!" When they drove on, back into the darkness, Micah could no longer see the nastiness on the windshield, and he called out, "Now the glass is clean!"¹²

That's what the Law does: it shines the searchlight of God's righteousness into the darkness of our lives and reveals that, while our "*coats*" may look pretty good, the truth is that apart from Jesus, our *hearts* are in a real mess indeed.

Another way to think about the function of God's Law is what I call "The Principle of Wet Paint." Without the sign, we might or might not touch the paint. We might not even notice that the paint had been applied. But the sign presents a challenge. The sign erects a boundary,

time again, Jesus transformed the Jewish understanding of the Law as a "coat" to be put on, and moved it within to become an inner "fire" of passionate love for God that resulted in changed behavior.

⁹ The New International Version uses the English word, "Gospel" 101 times. The earliest English editions of the Bible used the Anglo-Saxon "godspell" to translate εὐαγγέλιον.

¹⁰ Much of what follows comes from P. Joel Snider, "Gospel," in *The Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991): The Greek word translated as "Gospel" is "euangelion" (εὐαγγέλιον), which means "Good News." In the New Testament, "gospel" refers both to Jesus' teachings about the reign of God (Mark 1:14) and the stories told about Jesus after His resurrection (Galatians 1:11-12). In both cases, "gospel" refers to work that God alone initiates and completes. The basic content of the Gospel is this:

- "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).
- "There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:22b-23).
- "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).
- "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).
- "For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (Romans 3:28).
- "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

¹¹ Tchividjian, "Two Words."

¹² William Wimmer, pastor of Grace Chapel Church of God, Benton, Arkansas

and our sinful nature hates boundaries. The Law is not a bad thing. God has given Law to protect and improve our lives, not to limit or diminish them. Here's Paul again:

“Well, then, am I suggesting that the law of God is evil? Of course not! The law is not sinful, but it was the law that showed me my sin. I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet.’ But sin took advantage of this law and aroused all kinds of forbidden desires within me!” (Romans 7:7-8, NLT).

“Coat Folks” deal with the forbidden desires kindled by the Law’s boundaries by erecting boundary marker after boundary marker, behavioral rule after behavioral rule. “Coat Folks” live by the word, “DON’T!”

The truth is that the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees—the blue-law guys—really thought that they were getting it right. They were so intent on getting it right that they created 613 more laws as a “hedge” around the Ten Commandments so that they would be absolutely, tee-totally sure to keep God’s law. “Don’t do this!” they said. “And don’t do that!”

The blue-law guys set up lots of rules that they thought they could keep, and they really, really thought they were totally squared-away. They thought their windshields were squeaky clean. And it was because the Pharisees took their laws so seriously that Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:20 came as a real shocker to Coat Folks: *“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

The blue-law guys didn’t like Jesus because His approach was similar to the one Stephen Kingsley uses in his carpet cleaning business. I think I’ve told you this story before, too, but it makes this point perfectly.

This is a little gross, but one of Kingsley’s special cleaning services is removing pet urine, and in order to show folks why they need his services, he darkens their living rooms and then turns on a powerful black light. The black light causes urine crystals to glow brightly, and, to the horror of homeowners, urine traces can usually be seen not only on the carpet, but on walls, drapes, furniture, and even on lamp shades.

“One homeowner begged me to shut off the light, saying, ‘I can’t bear to see anymore. I don’t care what it costs. Please clean it up!’ Stephen said. Another woman said, ‘I’ll never be comfortable in my home again.’¹³

Like the bugs on the windshield, the stains were always there, but they were invisible until the light exposed them. That’s what Jesus did—and does—to our sin. But, like Kingsley the carpet guy, Jesus doesn’t show us our problems in order to leave us stuck with them. No, Jesus offers a cleaning service that does in fact offer perfection—not ours, but His.

Denise Banderman was worried about her final exam in Youth Ministry at Hannibal-LaGrange College in Missouri. She had studied really hard, but when the teacher showed up for the exam and proceeded to conduct a review before giving out the exam papers, much of what he reviewed had to do with obscure parts of the textbook that threw the students into sheer panic.

Finally it was time to take the exam. “Leave the exams face down until I tell you to begin,” the professor said. When Denise turned her exam over, she found that every answer on the exam had been filled in. Even her name was entered on the paper. When she came to the end of the exam, she found these words: “This is the end of the exam. All of the answers on your test are correct, and you will receive an ‘A’ on the final exam. None of the work you did to prepare

¹³ Stephen Kingsley, Craigmont, Idaho, www.preachingtoday.com.

you for this exam had anything to do with the fact that you received an ‘A.’ *The reason that you passed this test is that the creator of the test took it for you. You have just experienced . . . Grace.*¹⁴

That’s how Law and Gospel work for us, too. There really are “right answers,” and they really are beyond all our preparation. But the key to the Gospel, to the Good News, is this: our Creator has taken the final exam for us. By His one sacrifice, the sacrifice of His own life, Jesus “*has made perfect forever those who are being made holy*” (Hebrews 10:14). What you and I have to do is to admit that we need His help. And we still need that help, even if we’ve been Christians for years and years, because so long as we live on this earth, Sin is still at work in us.

Even after having followed Jesus for decades, Paul still wrote, “*I know I am rotten through and through so far as my old sin nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn, I can’t make myself do right. I want to, but I can’t. When I want to do good, I don’t. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. . . . Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin?*”

Now this is indeed a predicament, and it’s a predicament that has us all inextricably in its grasp; but to stop here is to end up where the blue-law guys were and where Muhammad Ali apparently is: facing a hopeless balance scale of good deeds vs. bad deeds, because in God’s economy, just one sin *erases* all of our good deeds.

Happily, we don’t have to stop here, as Paul went on to exclaim: “*Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. . . . **So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.** For the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death*” (Romans 7:18-19, 24-25, 8:1-2, NLT).

Say that with me: “**So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.**” That’s Good News for every one of us!

¹⁴ Denise Banderman, Hannibal, Missouri.