

Series: 2 Corinthians
Title: The Letter and the Spirit
Text: 2 Corinthians 3: 6
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2 Corinthians 3: 6: Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.

Our subject is “The Letter and the Spirit.”

The apostle Paul contrasts the Old Covenant of works and the New Covenant of grace, the letter (law of Moses) and the spirit (gospel of Jesus Christ.)

This shows that Paul’s chief opponents at Corinth, as everywhere, were Judaizers. Judaizers claimed to believe salvation by grace through faith in Christ. Everyone in our day says salvation is by grace. But in addition, they insisted believers also must keep the law of Moses or they could not be saved, including the ten commandments and dietary laws. They do the same in our day. This mixing of the law and the gospel is the chief sin Paul speaks of in all his epistles; it is the chief sin we face in our day. So Paul declares in our text

Proposition: God’s true preachers preach the gospel of Christ, not the works of men, not the law given at Mt. Sinai.

NOT OF THE LETTER, BUT OF THE SPIRIT

2 Corinthians 3: 6: Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit:...

Preaching *of the letter* is preaching that says you must keep the law in order to be saved. In our day, it is common for will-workers to turn some part of grace into a work in order to be saved as well: such as faith, repentance, good works, etc. The apostle Peter was confronted by men preaching *of the letter*.

Acts 15: 1: And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. 5: But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed,...

Preaching *of the letter* claims to believe the gospel that salvation is not by works but by grace through faith in Christ. Yet, they add the law.

Acts 15: 5...saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.

It is common in our day to say it is *needful* for believers to keep the ten commandments for sanctification, for holiness. And when a believer does not measure up, as they think he ought, they say it is *needful to command* them to keep the law of Moses, which usually involves disciplinary measures.

Preachers *of the letter* insist that preaching law will make sinners obedient. They say without it believers will live like they want to live. But scripture clearly reveals the law is not the constraint of the heart of true believers. It is the love of Christ which is our motive, not law. The love of Christ is heard only in the preaching *of the spirit*, the preaching of Christ’s faith unto the cross by which Christ made his people the

righteousness of God in him. The Judaizer's at Galatia were teaching that once a believer cast his care on Christ at Mt. Zion through the hearing of Christ's faithfulness, he was to go back to Mt. Sinai for sanctification through the hearing of the law or as Paul call's it, *by the flesh* and *by the works of the law*. Paul clearly objects by saying the message by which we were born of the Spirit of God is the message by which we are grown in grace and knowledge of Christ.

Galatians 3: 2: This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? 3: Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? 4: Have ye suffered so many things in vain? if *it be* yet in vain. 5: He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, *doeth he it* by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? 6: Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.

The law was not even given in Abraham's day. (Gal 3: 17) Abraham was made obedient to rest in Christ by the *hearing of faith*, that is by the hearing of the faith of Christ who redeemed his people from the curse of the law by his works. It is called in our text, *the ministry of the spirit*. It is the gospel of Christ. The same hearing of Christ's works by which he ministered the Spirit to us in the first hour is the message by which we are made obedient to follow and honor Christ, even as Abraham.

So when confronted by Judaizers, the apostle Peter preached *of the spirit*, the gospel of Christ's person and works. He declared how God sent him to Gentiles who never had the law and were never under the law. As Peter preached the gospel of Christ to those Gentiles, he said God,

Acts 15: 9: put no difference between us [Jews] and them [Gentiles without the law], purifying their hearts [not by law but] by faith. 10: Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke [of law] upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? 11: But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ [through the new, everlasting covenant of grace, the ministry of the spirit, the gospel of Christ] we [Jews] shall be saved, even as they [Gentiles, that is, without our keeping the law of Moses]

Preaching *of the spirit* is declaring the gospel of Christ, that God in Christ fulfilled all the obligations of the covenant for his people so that all the promises of God are yes and amen to the believer in Christ so that God gets all the glory and the believer gets none. (2 Cor 1: 20; 1 Cor 1: 31)

Understand, every sinner saved by God—even those who lived during the days of the old covenant—are saved through the everlasting covenant of grace, by God establishing the law for us, making us righteous in his only begotten Son, with no regard to our law-keeping—this is what David said,

2 Sam 23: 5: Although my house *be* not so with God; yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all *things*, and sure: for *this is* all my salvation, and all *my* desire, although he make *it* not to grow.

THE LETTER KILLETH

2 Corinthians 3: 6: Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth,...

In addition to being the letter that killeth, the law is called *the ministration of death* and *the ministration of condemnation*. (2 Cor 3: 7, 9)

The preaching of *the letter* kills by sin deceiving men into thinking they can keep the letter of the law. Before the apostle Paul was given faith to rest in Christ alone, this deathly self-righteousness made him the servant of sin. He said,

Romans 7: 8: But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence.

Concupiscence is doing what is unlawful. Remember, Paul said that the law is good if a man use it lawfully. (1 Tim 1: 8) But while dead in sins, sin made Paul use the law unlawfully. How so? He used the law to measure his obedience and he thought himself righteous and holy by his obedience to the law. This is the sin Paul speaks of throughout his epistles when he speaks of believers no longer being the servants of sin, no longer serving in oldness of the letter. Watch the before and after:

Romans 7: 8:...For without the law sin was dead. 9: For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.

Before Christ made Paul hear the law, by his own obedience to the law, Paul thought *his sin was dead and he was alive*. But after the spirit quickened him to life, he heard the law then his sin became alive and Paul died.

As long as sin deceived him, he did not hear the law. He thought by his obedience to the law, he had put away his sin and made himself alive by becoming more and more righteous and holy. If left in that state the law would have killed him and condemned him forever because *the letter killeth*.

But Christ intervened with the gospel. After he heard the gospel, after Christ ministered the quickening spirit unto him, then his so-called law-keeping became his greatest sin and he saw he was a sinner, dead and condemned under the law.

It was due to the fact that he was made to hear the law declare him guilty and shut his mouth, that he says

Romans 7: 12: Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just and good.

The reason Paul (and every believer) *delights in the law of God after the inward man* is not because the law tells me I am holy and righteous but because it declares me guilty and shuts me up to Christ. That is the good way the law kills, that is the law killing our self-righteous man through the spirit of the gospel of Christ. But the bad way the letter killeth is if we are left deceived by our sin into thinking we can keep the law. Paul said,

Romans 7: 11: For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me.

The law is not the cause but sin. Sin deceives men into thinking they are obeying the letter of the law. If left in that state the law will kill and condemn them in the day of judgment.

Please hear this, if any professing believer imagines that you must or can keep the law yourself, in addition to Christ, or else you cannot be saved then Christ shall profit you nothing.

Galatians 5: 2: Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. 3: For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. 4: Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.

If that is your case the letter shall kill you.

Galatians 3: 10: For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed *is* every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. 11: But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, *it is* evident: for, The just shall live by faith. 12: And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them.

Someone told me a sad story. Apparently, posted an article of mine where I said “*the law is only kept when done in perfection.*” Someone commented that the bible does not say that. Sin has deceived the poor sinner who made that statement. There it is plain as day in Galatians 3: 10. How can the law be a rule *of life*, when scripture clearly says the *law is not of faith*. The keeping of the law only involves a person doing it and living in it if he does it perfectly. But there is no faith involved in keeping the law. The law is not a rule of life, it is “*the letter that killeth,*” “*the ministration of death,*” “*the ministration of condemnation,*” given by God “*that the offense might abound*”, “*that every mouth may be stopped and all the world become guilty before God*”, that “*no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.*” (2 Cor 3: 6, 7, 9; Rom 5: 20; 3: 19-20) The law is not against the promises of God. It is simply given by God to declare us guilty to make God’s people flee to Christ that we might be saved by Christ’s works of faith.

Galatians 3: 21: *Is* the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. 22: But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.

THE SPIRIT GIVETH LIFE

2 Corinthians 3: 6: Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.

The gospel is also called, *the ministration of the spirit* and *the ministration of righteousness*. (2 Cor 3: 8-9)

Notice, the word spirit has a little “s.” This is performed by the Holy Spirit. But here it is not speaking of the Holy Spirit. It means the word of Christ spoken into our hearts by which Christ quickens us to life, or as our text says, *giveth life*. He said,

John 6: 63: It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, *they* are spirit, and *they* are life.

In our text, Paul is speaking about the preaching of true ministers of Christ as ministers *of the spirit*. But Christ is the minister *of the spirit*. He speaks the words unto us which quicken us to life. His words spoken by him are *the incorruptible seed*. So why does Paul call his preachers ministers of the spirit? The reason Paul calls Christ’s preachers ministers *of the spirit* is because the word Christ ministers is “*the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.*”

1 Peter 1: 22:...ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit [the gospel of Christ makes the heart holy and pure, not law]...23: Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. 24: For all flesh is as grass,...25: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. [Christ said the flesh profits nothing, the words I speak are spirit and life. Here is the reason Paul calls Christ’s preachers ministers of the spirit] 25...And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.

The gospel is also called “*the ministration of righteousness*”. When Christ speaks his words into our hearts he writes his laws on our new hearts—the *law of faith*, the *law of righteousness*, the *law of the Spirit of life in Christ*, the *law of sin*, the *law of Christ*, the *law of liberty*. By this he, teaches us he has established the law

for us. He is our righteousness through faith. This is how God writes his law on our hearts. It is writing the gospel of Christ on our hearts. This is how God makes his everlasting covenant with a believer. Compare the following two scriptures noting the word “write” and where it is written and who does the writing.

Hebrews 10:16: This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them;

2 Corinthians 3:3:...ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written...with the Spirit of the living God;...in fleshy tables of the heart.

It is Christ’s Righteousness by whom all God’s law is established by which all his people are saved in every age. The Psalmist of old was quickened the same as us by the same word of grace, by Christ’s righteousness.

Psalm 119: 40: Behold, I have longed after thy precepts: quicken me in thy righteousness....50: This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me....93: I will never forget thy precepts: for with them thou hast quickened me...130: The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple.

God makes Christ unto us everything we need to be accepted of God: Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification and Redemption. (1 Cor 1: 30) So Christ is all the believer needs and we are complete in him. (Col 2: 10)

Please understand, Christ does not speak the words of life, nor minister his Righteousness through the preaching *of the letter* that turns sinners from Christ back to Moses and themselves. *The letter killeth.*

But *the spirit*, the gospel of Christ, is the message through which we are quickened to the obedience of faith. It is the same message by which Christ continues to constrain us to look nowhere but to him and to honor him in all we say and do in this life.

Amen!