

The Letter Kills, but The Spirit Gives Life
2 Corinthians 3:4-11
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St. Paul tells us that ministers of the new covenant are made competent by God. God makes them sufficient by the message that he gives them to preach. This is commonly misunderstood today. I've preached much on the importance of judging one's pastor. It's not because I think people are reticent to judge, but rather, because Jesus commands us to judge with right judgment and beware of false prophets. But Jesus does not command us to judge our pastors based on whether we like their personality or style or whether we agree with what he is preaching or not. Jesus commands us to judge whether the preacher is preaching the truth according to Christ's word.

This is what makes a preacher sufficient; not how flashy or entertaining he is; not how elegant his speech is; not that you like everything he says. Pastors are not sufficient in themselves at all. Their sufficiency is from God, who has sent them to proclaim the saving Gospel. So, it is important that every Christian make this distinction when judging whether you should or should not believe what the pastor preaches. Judge not whether you like what is said. Judge whether it is the truth. And judge whether your pastor is a minister of the covenant of the letter or whether he is a minister of the covenant of the Spirit.

The covenant of the letter kills. It does not save. The letter is the Law, which was engraved in letters on stone. This Law, which was given to Moses, was glorious. It was so glorious that Moses needed to cover his face so as not to frighten the Israelites, because his face shone with the reflected glory of God's Law. The Law of God is good and wise and sets God's will before our eyes. Just listen to God's Law:

You shall have no other gods. You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God. Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy. Honor your father and your mother. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. You

shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or his donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Can you find anything wrong with these commandments? Of course not! They are holy and good. If we actually lived according to these commandments, there would be less crime in the world, less heart break, less senseless deaths, less suffering. Those who devote their lives to these commandments do find some glory in this life, for a time. In fact, most religions in the world are devoted in some way or another to living according to these commands in order to acquire glory. Most religions in the world teach that you reach the glories of heaven by living a good life and doing good.

Yet, St. Paul says that this ministry of the letter brings death! How can this be? He explains it in the seventh chapter of the book of Romans. "If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good."

So, St. Paul maintains that the Law is good, yet the Law kills. Why is that? It's not because the Law is bad. It's because we're bad. We are sinners. So, when the Law shows us what we ought to do to be good, instead of it glorifying us and giving us eternal life, it shows us our sin and that we deserve to be punished, as Romans 3:20 says, "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in God's sight, since through the Law comes knowledge of sin."

This is why God calls his ministers, ministers of the new covenant of the Spirit, not of the letter. God wants his ministers to proclaim the words of eternal life. Only the ministry of the Spirit gives life. The ministry of the letter kills. Those ministers who preach only the letter, who give you hope only in your own works for your salvation are ministers of death. There is no set of rules that you can perfect that will earn you eternal life.

Yet, that does not mean that ministers of the Spirit should not preach the Law! In fact, ministers of the Spirit are required to preach the Law precisely because it kills. The letter must serve the Spirit, so that the Spirit can bring the dead back to life! St. Paul goes on in Romans chapter 7, “Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.”

The Law, these commandments of God do not give life, but rather they expose the sinner to be sinful beyond measure. Now why would God want his ministers to do this? Why would he want people’s sins to “become sinful beyond measure”? It is so that he can save them by grace! St. Paul writes in Galatians chapter 3, “But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”

The Letter imprisons everyone under sin, so that no one can deny the reality of his sin. If you can’t escape the reality of your sin, what can you do? All you can do is ask God for mercy. That is the condition a sinner must be in in order to receive the gospel. If you think that you can overcome your sins yourself or that they are not a big deal, you will not accept the Gospel.

This is why faithful pastors must preach the Law. The Letter must do its work and kill, so that souls may be saved on the Last Day. This is why it is of the utmost importance that when the Law is preached to you and your conscience is pricked and you don’t like what it says, that you do not try to resist the preaching of the Law, but confess yourself to be a sinner, so that God may have mercy on you.

The letter serves the ministry of the Spirit. The ministry of the Spirit is the ministry of the Gospel. Now, it is not as some imagine, that the Spirit comes apart from the words of Holy Scripture. Rather, the Gospel of the Spirit is proclaimed in the Holy Scriptures.

The Gospel is that Jesus Christ is true God and true man. He was born without sin. He is the only man to never sin. He fulfilled the Law perfectly. The letter had no right to kill him. Yet, Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God, took upon himself *our* sins. Scripture says, “God made him who knew no sin to become sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21) And St.

Peter writes, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.” (1 Peter 3:18) Christ is the righteous one, who died in exchange for the unrighteous ones.

This is the message of the Gospel. Christ Jesus has taken away the power of the letter to kill us, by himself dying in our stead! He takes away our sin, which gave the Law the power to slay us! Jesus is our life, which is given to us not by our works, but through faith.

The letter demands works; the Spirit produces faith. This is the difference. The reason the Law cannot save you, is because you cannot save yourself. The Law simply demands works, but gives you no power to accomplish them. The Gospel saves, because it does not require works, but rather gives you the gift of life to be received by faith.

The Gospel must predominate a preacher’s sermon if he is to be a minister of the Spirit. This does not mean that a preacher preaches lots of Gospel and only a little Law. Rather, it means that the Law serves the purpose of the Gospel and not the other way around. It is important for sinners to hear that they should not worship other gods; that they should put aside their work and pleasure and hear and learn God’s Word; that they should obey authority; love their neighbor; be chaste and not fornicate; not steal, and not covet. It is important for sinners to hear this, so that they can beware of their sin and repent. It is important for the Law to kill you now, so that you are not sentenced to eternal death on the Last Day.

The Gospel predominates by responding to the killing of the Law by bringing sinners to life. Are you guilty of loving other things more than God and neglecting to worship and serve him? Have you been disobedient or lazy? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you been unchaste? Greedy? Have you been dishonest? Have you coveted what does not belong to you? Has the Law exposed you to be sinful beyond measure? Then repent and believe in the Gospel! Jesus forgives your sins. He paid for them with his blood. He died for the idolater, the sloth, the rebel and criminal, for the fornicator, homosexual, and adulterer, he died for liars and covets and thieves. Jesus’ blood makes atonement for all sins. Repent of your sins; don’t cling to them or defend them. Cling to Jesus, who forgives and saves.

The ministry of the Spirit makes alive. Obviously, that means that the Gospel gives eternal salvation to all who believe it. Yet, the Gospel makes you alive today. St. Paul writes in Ephesians chapter 2, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” God has done all that for those who believe in the Gospel. You see, the Law commands you to do, but does not give you the power to do it. The Gospel calls you to believe something that has already been accomplished and also gives you the power to believe it! To be made alive by the Spirit is to be given faith in Christ!

And this new life that you receive through the Gospel produces good fruits now in this life. We are not called to continue in our sin, but to die to sin and to live to Christ. The Spirit who dwells in you through faith, also empowers you to love, to be merciful, patient, and forgiving. The Spirit accomplishes in this life, what the Law cannot because of sin. Even more, the Spirit gives us the promise of eternal life, which was denied us by the Law. This eternal life has been given to us as a gift from the Father by the Spirit through Christ Jesus. Amen.