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## **"THE LETTER KILLETH, BUT THE SPIRIT GIVETH LIFE."**

**"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." 2 Cor. 3:6.**

A reckless application of Scripture without due consideration of the context has ever been a fruitful source of error among Christians, and not unfrequently proves a stumbling block even to those considerably advanced in the knowledge of the truth. A single expression of any writer or speaker, when isolated from his line of thought or argument, might be construed to prove the very opposite of what he intended. This if done intentionally would be dishonest. But as a general thing it is merely the result of a reckless habit. A single text occurs to the mind from memory, and a meaning is attached to it without consulting the context to see if the line of thought there pursued will bear it out.

For this reason, a peculiar, and we think hurtful conclusion, has been drawn by many from the above words of the Apostle Paul. We would therefore inquire – the letter of what, killeth? and the spirit of what, giveth life?

Many presume that it is the letter of God's word and are therefore inclined to esteem the word lightly, while they attach all importance to the spirit. But the word is the voice of the spirit. An esteemed Christian friend expressed the sentiment of this class as follows: I look for divine guidance in three ways: through God's spirit, his providences, and his word, which I esteem in the order named. And some evidently mistaken leadings, entirely out of harmony with the Word, gave sad evidence that the supposed leadings of God's spirit were merely the fancies of the human spirit.

"Sanctify them through thy truth, thy Word is truth," was Jesus' prayer; and his command, "Search the Scriptures...for they are they which testify of me." Again he says, The spirit shall receive of mine [those things written in the Scriptures] and shall show them unto you. John 16:14.

We have no intimation in the Scriptures that the Spirit of God leads his children through any other medium than that of his Word. In fact we have the express statement of our Lord to this effect, in John 16:13 – "He will not speak from himself; he will speak whatever he may hear." (See Diaglott, R.V., Rotherham and Young.)

To speak from himself, would be to speak independently of the Scriptures and to render them of only secondary importance. God could speak to his children now in visions and dreams, as he did before the Scriptures were completed, but since these, his "two witnesses," the Old and New Testaments were prepared, he has honored them as the medium for the communication of his will.

We do not doubt that God sometimes impresses some scriptural truth or principle upon the mind both in our waking and sleeping hours, to thus arouse and quicken us; but if we have any strong impression that is not in harmony with the Word of God, we may be sure that it comes from another spirit, and not from the Spirit of God. To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." Isa. 8:20.

Just so we would also scrutinize the circumstances of life, lest that which is only a device of Satan, might be mistaken for the providence of God, and an indication of his will. We should call to mind the fact that in this age "the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence," that we are opposed by the powers of darkness at every step. How **[R614 : page 5]** often for instance when we would make some special effort to advance the truth, do we find one or a variety

of circumstances conspiring against us. And if the adversary can only delude us into the idea that these circumstances are the providences of God indicating his will, how easily will he accomplish his purpose and our hindrance; whereas if we recognize their true source, as soldiers of Christ we will battle against adverse circumstances, and plant the standard of the heavenly kingdom in view of the world.

We should not expect to conquer circumstances without experiencing suffering, deprivation, and loss of earthly things; often we shall be wounded, and sometimes partially defeated and greatly discouraged. But if our purpose is founded in the truth, don't let us be deceived into the idea that the providence of God is against us, but let us look to the Captain for direction as to how we may master the situation. While thus bearing in mind the policy and deceptive arts of our great opposer, we also remember the comforting assurances that "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord," and that "Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down, for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand." Psa. 37:23,24.

Yes, circumstances which are now largely in the hand of the enemy – "the prince of the world," such as sickness, business perplexities, loss of friends, strong opposition by the enemies of truth, and many things which may appear merely accidental, may even cause us to fall for a time partially defeated in our purpose to glorify God. But, blessed thought! though we may sometimes thus fall, we shall not be utterly cast down, for "the Lord upholdeth with his hand."

But without a full conviction that we are really doing the Lord's will in that which we strive to accomplish, it would be unwise thus to strive against opposition, and therefore we would inquire, Is there any way by which the soldiers of Christ may know and fully recognize the command of their Captain? In other words, How may

we know when our steps are ordered or directed of the Lord, and that we are not being deceived by the enemy? The Psalmist, we think, gives the key to the answer, when he prays, "Order (direct) my steps in thy Word." (119:113. [should be 119:133 - site Eitor]) Yes, just so we find it; the steps of a good man are all ordered or directed in the Word, and with "the law of his God in his heart, none of his steps shall slide." Psa. 37:31.

The Word of God furnishes principles, precepts and examples broad enough to indicate the Lord's will in the minutest affairs of life, but we must have constant recourse to it; and with full purpose of heart we must not only seek to know, but to obey it.

Seeing, then, that God has thus honored his Word as the channel for communicating his will to men, we cannot conclude that it is his Word that kills, while his Spirit, acting independent of it, and as a superior guide gives life. If this were our belief, we should cease to study the Word, and look for the leadings of the Spirit through dreams and visions and circumstances.

But referring again to 2 Cor. 3:6, we notice that Paul is comparing the Jewish dispensation with the Gospel dispensation. He shows that the law given to Israel, which was indeed ordained unto life, i.e., which guaranteed life to the obedient, was found to be unto death, because Israel was totally unable to keep it. The only condition of the law was, Obey! and he who fails in one point is guilty of all. If you can obey it perfectly, then you can have life. But though Israel with united voice said, "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do" (Exod. 19:8), doubtless greatly rejoicing in the prospect of everlasting life, yet not one was able to keep it. Why? Because they had only the letter of the law engraven on the tables of stone, and not the spirit of the law (which is love) written in their hearts. Therefore as death had reigned from Adam to Moses, so it continued to reign, for all were unable because of inherited weakness to keep

God's perfect law. And so that glorious law ordained or arranged to perpetuate life, was found to be "the ministration of death."

But since the Son of God took our nature, being born under the law, fulfilling all its requirements, and thus having a right to life, gave his life as a substitute or ransom for ours, we are introduced into a new dispensation. We are no longer under law, but under grace. (Rom. 6:14.) God's requirement is not now do if you would live, but the good news now is, that "there is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit."

In our present imperfect condition, no matter how much we endeavor to keep the law, and thereby merit life, we fail; it is impossible. The letter of the law condemned or killed every man that ever lived, except Jesus; and very many, inspired by its promise of life, tried to keep it in all sincerity. Verily, it has been abundantly proven that the letter of the law killeth.

But since we have been freed from the letter of the law by the death of Christ, he having fulfilled and settled our obligation, we have a new offer of life on a new condition, viz., if we walk after or strive to keep the spirit of the law. To such there is no condemnation. They may thus have life through Christ. The spirit of God's law is love. As Jesus and Paul taught, "Love is the fulfilling of the law." (Matt. 22:37,40, and Rom. 13:10.) We are as unable to fully keep the spirit of the law as Israel was, but we are only required to walk after or strive to keep it, and in so far as in our weakness we fail, the merit of Jesus supplies our deficiency.

It is then the spirit of the law (love) manifested in us, which, through Christ, gives or guarantees life. Even though that spirit be not fully developed, "he that has begun the good work in us is able to complete it." Our desire and effort to keep the very spirit of the law is reckoned as a perfect keeping of it, while our inability to do

so is compensated for by the sacrifice of Christ. When men are restored to perfection, the law of God will be written in their hearts (Jer. 31:33), and its spirit of love will permeate their whole being, and its retention will be their guarantee of everlasting life. The letter of the law killeth, but the spirit of the law giveth life. "Thanks be unto God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 15:57.)

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