

"The Letter Killeth"

"A minister of the New Covenant: not of the letter, but of the Spirit: for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life"—2 Corinthians 3:6.

There is a great lesson in this but it is often sadly misapplied to the detriment of holiness and encouragement of looseness. In the first place, we should note very particularly that the Scriptures never speak of the commands of Christ as the "letter that killeth." Rather Jesus says—

"The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63).

The "letter that killeth" was the Mosaic Law—the "law of carnal commandments"—designed specifically to expose and manifest man's sinful, rebellious nature, and to humble him before his Almighty and Holy Maker. And even then we must be very careful how we look upon the letter of this Law, for the Law was "holy, just and good" (Rom. 7:12). Jesus said (Matt. 23:23)—

"This (the spirit of the Law) ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other (the letter) undone."

He condemned them—not for obeying the letter—but for glorifying the letter to the exclusion and neglect of the spirit which the letter was intended to develop and teach. To the Ephesian ecclesia, the Spirit says (Rev. 2:2-5)—

"I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience . . . But—thou hast left thy first love . . . Repent or I will come and remove thy candlestick."

There is the letter without the spirit. If love is not the motive force, then works, labor, and patience are not only useless, but are obnoxious to God, for they just glorify the flesh. Therefore God cannot acknowledge a candlestick—no matter how bright—that is shining by its own self-glorifying efforts, and not truly and consciously by the power of the Spirit of God.

Whatever we are doing, the moment we let slip the consciousness that God gives all the increase, and that all power, both to will and to do, is of God—then we cease to serve God or to be of any value to Him because we cease to glorify Him, and begin to glorify ourselves.

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We must have a viewpoint regarding the "letter that killeth" that does not do dishonor to God's holy Law given through Moses, nor to God's own eternal goodness and kindness as manifested in all His works, including that Law.

Killing, or death, is always by and through SIN. Therefore the killing part of the letter must be due to man, the sinner. Paul explains clearly how the letter kills (Rom. 7:9-13)—

"For I was alive without the Law once . . ."

—that is before he reached the age of knowledge and responsibility—before the Law and all its lessons and implications broke upon his consciousness—

" . . . but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death.

"For SIN, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me.

"The Law is holy, just and good. Was then that which is Good made death unto me? God forbid. But SIN, that it might appear sin, WORKING DEATH IN ME by that which is good.'

That is how "the letter killeth." When we look into it and get the true picture of what it

means, we find no justification at all for the very popular orthodox interpretation of this passage—that carefulness to observe the letter of God's law kills, and we can quite safely ignore the "letter of the law" if we fulfill what we think is the "spirit of the law."

This is a very common, but very unsound and dangerous interpretation, very pleasing to the self-will of the flesh. It is particularly dangerous because this thought is so deeply ingrained into this passage in the world's eyes that we are apt quite unconsciously to adopt the world's view.

But the true meaning does not convey this thought at all—by the letter of God's Holy Law man was and is condemned—that is the whole purpose of the Law, as Paul explains in writing to the Romans; then by God's grace man is redeemed from condemnation, and given the power, by the Spirit, to fulfill the required righteousness of the Law by Jesus Christ.

The Law of Moses, says Paul (2 Cor. 3:7), was a "ministration of death." Why? Because—
"Israel could not look to the end" (v. 13).

Moses' face shone with the glory of God, and Israel was afraid to look at him, and he had to cover his face—he had to conceal the glory that was the end of the Law—the "end" of the Law in two senses that are really one: for that glory manifested both the Law's termination and the Law's whole object and purpose.

The Law itself was "ordained to life," as we have seen from Paul's remarks in Rom. 7. In what way was a "ministration of death" ordained to life?

It brought death that it might lead to life. It brought humility that it might lead to exaltation. Paul says it was a schoolmaster. What were the lessons that it taught?

First of all, it taught God's infinite majesty and holiness; then it taught sin's sinfulness and ugliness, and man's helplessness because of the power of sin; and then it taught God's abounding love and mercy in the providing of the way to life through sacrifice and forgiveness. This is what Paul is endeavoring to show to the Roman brethren—the beautiful and essential place of the Law in the all-wise Divine pattern of salvation in Christ Jesus.

But they "could not look to the end." Because of the veil of the flesh they could not see the glory of the Spirit. They could not see Christ, who was the end and purpose and whole living meaning of every type and ordinance of the Law.

The holy, and just, and good Law awakened in them no recognition of their weakness and helplessness and need—their need for the Saviour, the God-provided Lamb, the great High Priest, the Mercyseat (or "Place of Mercy"), the Laver of Purification, the Altar of Sacrifice and the Altar of Prayer. They felt no need—and so the beautiful Law that God had given them failed—through the self-satisfied blindness of the flesh. But it did not really fail.

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“The letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.”

The law of Christ must be applied in the Spirit of Christ. This holy, flesh-mortifying law, applied in any other way than the loving, humble spirit of Christ, is a terrible, destroying thing.

But still the law must be applied. It must be honored and upheld. We are doing Christ no service when we slur over his law in a mistaken application of what we consider love and mercy on the plea that the "letter killeth." There is nothing killing about the letter of Christ's law, properly understood and applied. Rather we die without it.

It should never be necessary for an ecclesia to enforce Christ's law. It should never be necessary to apply the command—

“If thy brother trespass, rebuke him.”

It should never be necessary to apply—

“Put away from yourselves that wicked person.”

The law of Christ was never meant to be applied in this way. It was meant rather to be received in every minute detail eagerly and lovingly and anxiously by every one who takes upon himself the great and holy Name of Jesus.

Why is it that the transforming glories of this holy and Divine law are so often received so reluctantly among us? The answer lies in the deceitfulness of the flesh and the earthy, downward pull of the natural, animal mind.

James calls this law the “perfect law of liberty” (Jas. 1:25). A deeper and more accurate description could not be devised. Here are three interwoven and inseparable principles—perfection, law, and liberty. How—we may ask in our natural ignorance—how can there be liberty as long as there is law? Is not an imposed law restriction, and is not liberty freedom from restriction?

But the mind of the Spirit reveals to us that there can never be true liberty without perfect obedience to perfect law. Jesus said—

“Come unto me; learn to be free by submitting to my yoke” (John 8:32; Matt. 11:29).

Those that heard him answered in their darkness, “We want no yoke. We ARE free. We have never been in bondage” (John 8:33). But Jesus said to them (v.34)—

“Whosoever committeth sin is the slave of sin.”

All men are miserable, helpless slaves until Christ’s law and power sets them free from the power of sin within themselves. What is sin? “Sin,” says John, “is transgression of Divine law” (1 John 1:3-4)—anything out of harmony with the Divine will and way. And sin is slavery unto death.

So there is no perfect freedom outside of perfect obedience to God’s perfect law. Any deviation from that line means—to just that extent—slavery and loss of true liberty. Whenever we yield to the desires of the flesh, we are not (as we proudly fancy) enjoying our freedom—we are rather publicly confessing our miserable slavery to an evil, dominating, gloating master, who finally mocks us with the wages of death for our craven service to him. Just looking ahead a few verses in this 3rd chapter of 2nd Cor., we see that Paul says (v. 17)—

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”

Liberty from Law? No. We cannot have liberty without law. We cannot be free without knowing and fulfilling the law, although the more freely we accept the law and the more we absorb it within us and adjust our lives to its wisdom and light, the less it becomes law. Law, we are told (1 Tim. 1:9)—

“Is not for the righteous, but for the lawless and disobedient.”

Is this a contradiction to what we have seen about the “perfect law of liberty?” No. We are all “lawless” to begin with—law is to create the righteous man. But to those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, it is not law, but wisdom; it has no penalties, but only blessings.

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The ministration of condemnation was glorious (v.9). Where was its glory? In the face of Moses, the mediator of that law (v.7). But it was a fading glory; there was nothing permanent

about it; it was a surface, super-imposed glory—a temporary manifestation of God’s glory—a shadowy type of the eternal “glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

Why was it in Moses’ face? Because he had appeared before God to plead on their behalf (Ex. 32:11), and through Moses God forgave them and accepted them and entered into a covenant of life with them (Ex. 34:9-10).

They had, by transgression, forfeited God’s blessing, and had made themselves subject to His righteous and necessary judgment on sin. God was about to destroy them, but the fervent, effectual prayer of a righteous man saved them.

Someone was found for whose sake God could righteously forgive them, and allow mercy to triumph over justice without destroying or violating justice. So their glory was in the face of Moses their savior, who brought them a law from God that could lead them back to life.

But they could not see where the glory of the Law lay. They could not see to the end of the Law (vs. 13-14).

"For Christ is the end of the Law for everyone that hath faith."

That is, the discerning eye of faith. They lacked it, and therefore they failed. Whether they fought against the Law or whether they set themselves to obey every jot and tittle, still they failed.

The letter killed them, either one way or the other, because they worshipped and glorified the letter as an end in itself. The law was given to teach them the great wisdom of humility—to lead them to recognize their helplessness and need. They used it to feed their pride and gratify their self-sufficiency.

They forgot the great and culminating yearly sacrifice for sin. . . burned "without the camp."

Are we ever so foolish as to measure ourselves against the perfect law of holiness with even a passing flash of self-satisfaction? Let us look to the end, and not fail like blind Israel. The end and purpose of the law is still the same—to teach us our natural helplessness and to lead us to the power of God in Christ, as Paul so beautifully describes in the last verse—

“We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as BY THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD."

The law of Christ is given so that weak, ugly, animal man may be led to a gradual transformation by the power of the Spirit into the image of Christ.

It is only while, by constant effort, we are keeping our minds and thoughts directly focused on the Divine glory in the face of Jesus that essential process of spiritual transformation occurs. As soon as we look away, it stops.

Unhappily, it is only too possible to be in an ecclesia for years and years in a stagnant, preoccupied, self-satisfied state, and never make any progress in spiritual transformation. How much closer are we to this Divine image than we were a year ago? How much have we grown in godliness? How much better do we comprehend—and manifest before men—the mind of Christ? It is relatively easy to "talk the Truth" to others, but how much of its true and gentle and holy spirit do we show to them in our lives? That is "preaching the Truth" in its fullness.

What we call "doctrine" (although actually it is an artificial distinction, for all teaching and commands are doctrine)—what we call "doctrine" is truly important, yea, it is essential, but dead "doctrine" without the living spirit of holiness and love is but an ugly repulsive, rattling skeleton.

What about those of us who have supposedly been going through this glorious, spiritual transforming process for 10, 20, 30, 40, or 50 or more years? What results have we to show? For in the end the sole test of the value and success of our lives will be—Has this process really occurred within us?

Paul says (v. 4, next ch.) speaking of some—

"In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them."

Belief is a matter of action and way of life, not of words and profession, as James so searchingly points out. Is it possible that we are among those unfortunates whom the god of this world (the veil of the flesh) has blinded, so that we are missing in our lives the Divine, transforming glories of Christ?—

"If our Gospel be hid (veiled—it is the same word), it is hid to them that are lost" (v. 3).

It is so easy to have the Gospel, but to be veiled from its power. Israel is our great lesson to teach humility and carefulness. Though exposed to the direct glories of the Law for hundreds and hundreds of years—though memorizing and contending about every jot and tittle—they never reached the goal to which the Law was intended to lead them, because they had a "veil upon their heart."

The veil, of course, is the flesh—the motions of the flesh—blocking off the vision of, and entrance into, the Most Holy Place. Christ alone was able to seize this veil in strong, Divinely-guided hands, and tear it from top to bottom—from top to bottom—the power was from above.

It was death for any but the High Priest to enter the Holy of Holies. It was death to even look with open face upon the Ark, as 50,000 men of Bethshemesh proved at the cost of their lives (1 Sam. 6:19). But Paul says (Heb. 10:19)—

"Having therefore boldness to enter into the Holiest, by the blood of Jesus."

Boldness to enter into the Holiest! Boldness—not presumption or brazenness, but loving, intimate confidence and assurance—to look with open face upon the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, the living Ark! Paul says (v. 12)—

"Seeing then we have such hope, we use great plainness (marg: boldness) of speech."

Great boldness of speech—in two ways: first, speaking confidently and intimately of holy things that Israel hardly dared to mention, and second, speaking with great plainness and seriousness about the tremendous responsibilities involved.

Do we realize the great and fearful holiness of our calling? Do we forget the elaborate carefulness and sanctification in all details that was required of the High Priest when he entered the Most Holy, "that he die not?" And not only at that time, but at all times: Every thing had to be exactly as God specified—not because there was any intrinsic importance in the ritual itself, but because of the great importance of carefulness and obedience in the realities of character that these shadows typified.

What do these things typify? What is the essential reality they teach? Can we "see to the end?" Or shall we, too, fail? God said, as the smoke of His anger still arose from the burnt bodies of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:3)—

"I will be sanctified in them that come nigh Me, and before all the people I will be glorified."

God has not changed. We have assembled ourselves into ecclesias solely for the purpose of

sanctifying and glorifying God, and drawing nigh unto Him in the sight of all the people.

We claim to be a genuine epistle of Christ written to men by the Spirit of God. This is the figure Paul uses in the early verses of this chapter. As such, we must cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit—all unclean and worldly habits and ways of thought.

If our claim to be a genuine epistle written by the power of the Spirit is justified by the actual facts, there is no more glorious and beautiful thing than such an assembly, all knit together in love, all seeking God's glory and each other's welfare, all submitting to each other and striving earnestly to avoid doing anything that would mar the mutual holiness, or distress one another.

Let us dwell upon this last thought—the sincere and Christlike desire to avoid grieving or offending our brethren. There are many powerful arguments against worldly things, habits, and activities, but none more powerful than Paul's beautiful declaration:

"While the world standeth, I will not do anything that will offend or distress my brother."

Truly such a body of people is an "epistle of Christ written by the Spirit of the living God"—a peculiar people, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, created and ordained of God for the purpose of good works to the honor and glory of His Name.

Nothing is sadder than when—with all the external necessities prepared and supplied—all the "doctrine"—all the ecclesial framework and organization—this divine ideal fails to materialize in its spiritual beauty because the veil of the flesh interposes, and there is coldness and darkness and pettiness and smallness where the marvelous light of God's glory should be flooding and permeating all.

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"We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us" (I Cor. 4:7).

The vessel exists solely to contain and display the treasure. The vessel has no value or glory or purpose in itself. The vessel is intentionally made valueless and weak. It was essential that Paul should be weak and poor and despised and buffeted, as was his Master before him. This was necessary to his value to God, and his fellowship with Christ, and so he "gloried in his infirmities," perceiving the Divine wisdom behind them.

No one was swayed by Paul's oratory; no one was attracted by his wealth; no one was awed by his position or worldly ability. To the natural man he carried not a spark of influence or authority. He was, as he said (1 Cor. 4:13)—

"As the filth of the world, and the offscouring of all things."

Purposely, in the wisdom of God, he possessed nothing to attract the natural man. But to those few among men who discerned real and spiritual values, this insignificant wanderer on the Roman highways brought a treasure of eternal and inestimable worth. These were the ones into whose hearts God had shined (v. 6)—

"God hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

No one should ever be the same again, once God has shined into their hearts the light of His glory. All bitterness and selfishness should be melted away. All smallness and pettiness and interest in present things should disappear.

For what else can be compared with the shining of God's own glory into a man's heart, relating him to a splendid and eternal order of things, and starting forces in motion within him that will lead him upward and upward until he stands in immortal and resplendent glory, clothed with the Divine nature?

Paul grasped the overwhelming reality of these things, and lived every moment of his life completely saturated with this spiritual atmosphere. Little wonder, then, that he could say, quite simply and unaffectedly, even amid a life of almost unparalleled suffering and tribulation (v. 17):

"Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

"Though our outward man perish," he says (v. 16), "yet the inward man is renewed day by day."

The outlook of Paul is always refreshingly exalted and spiritual. The great majority are so much more concerned about the welfare, comfort and appearance of the perishing outward man; but Paul had clearer vision, and he calls to all down through the ages into whose hearts the all-sufficient glory of God has shined (v. 18)—

"We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal."

Let us endeavor to live wholly in this wholesome, spiritual atmosphere with Paul, viewing all things from the eternal viewpoint and keeping the cleansing glory of God shining into our hearts. There are eternal things—things that the natural eye sees not—glorious, endless things that are offered to us freely. Paul says in v. 15—

"All things are for your sakes, that the abundant grace might through the thanksgiving of many redound to the glory of God."

"All things are for your sakes . . . All things are yours . . . the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come—all are yours, and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's."

Why, then, with this priceless glory of God streaming freely into our hearts, should we sit down among the ashes and seek after empty, earthy things?

—G. V. Growcott