

## SESSION 19: THE LETTER KILLS, THE SPIRIT MAKES ALIVE

2 Corinthians 3:3b-6

August 24, 2025

### **PREFACE**

Reading through the extended next passage in this study—vv3b to 11—early on, I was left wondering *Why? Why is Paul going here with the Corinth church, drawing a comparison of the Mosaic Covenant to the New Covenant in Christ?* On the surface at least it seems to have little if anything to do with the problems between the church and the apostle. *Why is he spending time with this?*

Paul has given us precious few hints about what these false apostles, with their false gospels, are actually teaching the Corinthians. When he writes to the Galatians it will be quite clear that false teachers are trying to “Judaize” the church—that is, as James Montgomery Boice explains it,

Conservative Jewish teachers who were legalizers had arrived from Jerusalem claiming to be from James, the Lord’s brother, and had begun to teach that Paul was wrong in his doctrine. They contended that Gentiles had to come under the Law of Moses to be saved. It was not enough for them to have Christ; they must have Moses too. To grace must be added circumcision. ➡

Acts 11:1-3  
Acts 15:1  
Galatians 3:1-3

For whatever reason Paul is not broadcasting specifics about the spurious teaching that is taking place in the Corinth church. Some say the teaching is, as in the Galatian letter, the need to obey the Judaic Law—that, indeed, the coming of the Spirit gives them a special *ability* to obey the law. One might conclude such from the passage before us.

Others, however, argue that Paul is using this discussion as foundation for a different point to the Corinthians—to wit, one more line of defense for his authority in Christ, because they are now in the time of a *new* covenant—a covenant that is of the Spirit, rather than the letter.

I would like to begin by reading the extended passage—2 Corinthians 2:15-16, then 3:3–11—from the ESV, in which the text flows a little better.

Reading the whole, we can begin to see that this is less an argument comparing the Mosaic Covenant to the new covenant in Christ, than it is a continuation of the argument for the gospel Paul, as an authentic apostle, is teaching. In a manner of speaking it is similar to the arguments made by the writer to the Hebrews for the superiority of Christ.

### **Read Hebrews 3:1-6.**

Now let's read the full context:

**For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?**

**And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. (2 Corinthians 2:15-16, 3:3-11)**

We insult our God by thinking that the new covenant in Christ nullifies the Mosaic Covenant, as if the Godhead concluded among its Members, *Well, that didn't work. Let's try something else.* At the same time, we call Him a liar even as we cheat ourselves, if we still today hold strictly to the dictates of the Mosaic Covenant, essentially trying to buy our way into heaven with our obedience.

No, the two work together; both are essential, which is why Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17).

And Paul would write, “What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! Rather, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law. For I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COVET’” (Romans 7:7).

Without the Law, we would all be doomed. Remove the Pentateuch and the Prophets from your Bible, and you may as well remove the New Testament, leaving you only a thin tome containing only a small subset of Hebrew poetry.

- Without the Law we would not know what behavior pleases God.
- Without the Law we would not know what God considers sin.
- Without the Law it would not be established that sin must be atoned for by the shedding of blood.
- Without that requirement, Jesus would not have died for our sins.
- Without His sacrifice, we all would be condemned to an eternity in the lake of fire.

In other words, without the Law and the Prophets, we would know nothing of God; He would have kept all that a secret, leaving us to be utterly ignorant of our sin, yet perishing in it.

### v3B

*...having been written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of hearts of flesh.*

Three comparisons are made here regarding the Corinthians as a “letter of Christ” (*epistole*):

- the method of composing the letter’s content: ink vs. Spirit;
- the medium upon which the words are written: tablets of stone (something flat and hard) vs. tablets of hearts of flesh.

Beneath the surface but just as real is a third comparison:

- the ultimate source of the message: Yahweh vs. Christ.

Paul is still in the process of defending his apostleship, and here he is doing so on the basis of his superior message. The imagery is remarkable: Long, long ago (even from Paul’s first-century perspective) Yahweh hand-wrote an essential, foundational “letter” to Israel upon stone tablets; He first *spoke* the words to Moses, then subsequently *wrote* them on tablets of stone (Exodus 31:18; 34:1, 28).

This document would comprise the foundational revelation of God to man, containing rules to govern righteous behavior that would bring glory to man's Maker—i.e., the Mosaic Covenant: a promise from God that if they follow His rules for living He will bless Israel; if they do not, He will curse them.

Paul contrasts that with God's new covenant in Christ, painting a beautiful picture of the church itself being a "letter of Christ," with the apostle, in a manner of speaking, taking on Moses' role as mediator—but now in this context a minister rather than priest. For there is now no need for a go-between; the Spirit of God has written this "letter of Christ" directly into the hearts of believers. Instead of having to read it off of tablets of stone, the letter of Christ is now *a part of them*; they carry it around with them.

Here in v3 Paul offers just the outline for what he will explain more fully in the following verses.

**v4**

**And such confidence we have through Christ toward God.**

**Read 1 Corinthians 15:6-10.**

Paul understands that none of this is about him. Just as the Corinthians are a "letter of Christ" not by means of any merit of their own, but because of the Holy Spirit having been written into their hearts, Paul's confidence—his boldness—comes not from himself, but because of what Christ is doing through him as a living and holy sacrifice toward God (Romans 12:1).

**vv5-6**

And again Paul fleshes out his brief statement with more details.

**Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.**

Oh, that every man of the cloth would have v5 emblazoned on their study wall and be convicted to recite it out loud every morning—and oh, how many have fallen because they did not remember—or even acknowledge—this important truth.

Years ago when we were performing in the San Diego area, our company had a close relationship with a small, older church whose young pastor was a bit stiff behind the pulpit. But he was earnest and humble. His sermons did not excite, but they were theologically sound. A few years later Linda and I dropped into one of his Sunday services. The church had since sold their old property, and they were now meeting in a theater, and we were surprised to see that the pastor had been remade. He was now a more dynamic speaker, and was even wearing smarter suits, much more fashionable. But we were saddened by the obvious fact that now his delivery was all about him. He had shed his humility and put on the flash and glam of the world. Now it was more about him than God.

Paul confesses to the Corinthians that his sufficiency—his competency, his ability to perform his assigned task—does not come from himself, which means what he preaches is not himself, but *Christ*—which he will expand on in Chapter Four, where he includes this integral statement:

**For we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord,  
and ourselves as your slaves for the sake of Jesus.  
(2 Corinthians 4:5)**

It is true that the apostle's role—a *diakonos*, a servant—is a combination preacher and prophet, for he speaks the word of God by the authority (and here, sufficiency) of God. Paul repeatedly in his letters makes this point; he “consistently uses the term [*diakonos*] in relation to the charge laid upon him to preach the word of God. [The word] conveys Paul's conviction that he is God's intermediary charged with a message from God to them” (Garland).

Turn, please, to the first chapter of Colossians, and note how vv21-22 correspond with the last part of v6 in our text, but vv23 and 25 correspond with the point just made about Paul's role as a *diakonos*.

**Read Colossians 1:21-23, 25.**

*...not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

Here the Greek behind “letter” is different than in vv2-3; Paul is no longer speaking of a document, an epistle, but the Greek is *gramma*, the individual characters drawn or written on the page; from this we get our word “grammar.” That is, the words.

Paul will speak of this again to the Roman believers.

**Read Romans 2:27-29.**

**Read Romans 7:6.**

From these and others we recognize that Paul uses “letter” to refer to the Mosaic Law, and contrasts it with the new covenant—God’s new agreement with individuals.

It is easy to fall into the trap of seeing the Mosaic Covenant and the new covenant as two ways to the same end. But in actuality each had a far different end. What would one receive by obeying every last letter of the Mosaic Law? Blessings from Yahweh.

**“Then it will be, because you listen to these judgments and keep and do them, that Yahweh your God will keep with you His covenant and His lovingkindness which He swore to your fathers. And He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock, in the land which He swore to your fathers to give you. You shall be blessed above all peoples; there will be no male or female barren among you or among your cattle.” (Deuteronomy 7:12–14)**

That’s it. No mention of “salvation”; no mention of eternity with God. Meanwhile, what does one receive by living by the new covenant in Christ? Blessings of a different sort—not least, eternal life with God—with the added benefit of the indwelling Spirit. As circumcision was the outward sign of adherence to the Law, the indwelling Spirit is the inward sign of adherence to Christ.

How does the letter “kill”?

Because it is impossible for any human being to obey every letter of the Law, this means that under the Law every human being lies under a curse (Galatians 3:10-14). It is a no-win situation. The purpose of the Law was *never* to save, but to demonstrate man’s need to *live by faith*. At the cross Christ Jesus took upon Himself that curse, thus freeing us from the dictates of the Law.

As already stated, none of this means that the Mosaic Law was a waste of time and effort; it played—and still plays—“a divinely given and specific role in salvation history” (Garland).

And how does the Spirit “give life”? It is important to understand that the Greek *zoopoiei* means literally to make alive, come to life; that is, moving from death to life by means of the Spirit. We do not often think about this: Every one of us is born spiritually dead, and we remain so until we come to Christ and receive the life-giving Spirit.

Let’s close with this familiar and important passage from the Second Chapter of Ephesians.

**And you were dead in your transgressions and sins...**

**But God, being rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, 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, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, so that no one may boast. Ephesians 2:1, 4–9**