

INI

2 Corinthians 3,4-11

Trinity 12 — 23 August 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the first lesson from Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, which was read earlier:

but our adequacy is from God, ⁶ Who also made us adequate as servants of a New Covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: Very often, when we go to a new doctor, we might want to know where he took his training and whether he keeps up-to-date on the latest medical advances in his field.

If we hire a tradesman for a repair job, we want to know if he is bonded and licensed.

If we go to school, we want to know if our instructor has the proper training in her field.

In these and other areas, we want to know if a person has the proper credentials to properly do the job.

In effect, that was the situation Paul faced in Corinth some two thousand years ago. Paul's opponents came with letters of recommendation. But Paul went on to show that there was less here than meets the eye. In fact, rather than sharing spiritual life, these false teachers were actually peddling spiritual death.

This brings me to my sermon theme for today, “**The Letter Of Death Versus The Spirit Of Life.**” I’ll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) A Letter Of Death**
- 2) A Spirit Of Life;** and,
- 3) The Spirit Of Life Endures**

1) A Letter Of Death. Paul faced various opponents in Corinth who came talking about Jesus, but, in fact, in a spiritual sense, were peddling death rather than sharing Life. Paul’s opponents and those who followed them, were on the path to spiritual death.

It is at times difficult to tell exactly what Paul’s opponents were preaching. But it seems as if in part they were saying that Jesus did not do everything necessary for our salvation. They were telling these early Christians that there were rules they had to follow to ensure their salvation. More often than not, they pointed to the Old Testament and the Law of Moses. Thus they said, “Do this, and live.”

First, Paul speaks of the self-sufficiency of his opponents. Paul’s opponents came with seemingly good letters of introduction to those early Christians in Corinth. In fact, if we read in between the lines, Paul’s opponents may have had more impressive credentials than Paul himself. But of these people, Paul implies that as impressive as their credentials might be, ultimately these credentials spoke of their self-sufficiency – a self-sufficiency apart from Christ.

Second, Paul speaks of the Old Covenant. Paul makes a kind of play on words and brings to mind his opponents’ credentials when he says that the letter kills. What the phrase, “the letter kills,” is referring to is the Ten Words on stone, or the Ten Commandments. In a general way, we can see that here Paul’s use of “letter” corresponds to the word “Law.” There is a parallel passage in which this correspondence is made clear.

But now we have been delivered from the Law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in newness of the Spirit and not in

the oldness of the letter. (Romans 7,6)

In this passage “deliverance from the Law” corresponds to the “oldness of the letter.” As in this letter to the Corinthians, “letter” means “Law.”

Third, Paul speaks of his opponents’ ministry of condemnation. To preach the Law is to condemn, because the function of the Law, of the letter, is to kill; that’s condemnation. As we read in Deuteronomy:

Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this Law by doing them.
(Deuteronomy 27,26)

Thus, those who preach Christ and then add something that we have to do, are preaching Law, and in effect preaching death.

Fourth, Paul speaks of a fading glory. There is no doubt that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai, his face glowed. But it did not glow on account of the Law, it glowed on account of being enveloped by the cloud of God’s glory, as is told to us in Exodus:

And it came about when Moses was coming down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of testimony were in Moses’ hand as he was coming down the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because of his speaking with Him.³⁰ So when Aaron and all the sons of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him...³³ When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.³⁴ But whenever Moses went before the LORD to speak with Him, he would take off the veil until he came out; and whenever he came out and spoke to the sons of Israel what he had been commanded,³⁵ the sons of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses’ face shone. So Moses would replace the veil over his face until he went in to speak with Him. (Exodus 34,29-35)

But this glory of Moses gradually faded until there came a time when he no longer needed to cover his face. This was a fading, one-time glory.

Compared to all this, we now turn to:

2) A Spirit Of Life. But if Paul says that the ministry of his opponents if is characterized by the letter of death, he is now saying that by the Grace of God the ministry entrusted to him ied shares the Spirit of Life.

Paul's first point for his Spirit of Life ministry is that Paul's sufficiency does not depend on his own strength; rather, it depends on God. This is a theme that Paul speaks about at the beginning of this letter.

Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things? (2 Corinthians 2,14-16)

Who, indeed, is sufficient for these things? In a word, no one. But on account of God's riches in Christ, Paul has a sufficiency that is of God, and not himself.

Second, Paul speaks of a New Covenant. Paul does not carry the Old Covenant with him but a New Covenant, a Covenant sealed in Jesus' blood. This is an echo of the promise given through the prophet Jeremiah,

Behold the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a New Covenant with the house of Judah — not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husbandman to them, says the LORD. But this is the Covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my Law, —that is, My Torah — into their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jeremiah 31,31-33)

This New Covenant has been sealed by Jesus' life-giving sacrifice on the Cross, for you, and I, and the world. We read of this in Hebrews:

Now the God of peace, Who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the Eternal Covenant, even Jesus Christ our Lord, equip you for every good thing. (Hebrews 13,20-21)

This is the Covenant that we will again share next week. This week we listen, but next week we shall not only hear, but also taste, as Jesus has said,

saying, “This cup is the New Covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” (1 Corinthians 11,25)

Third, this is a ministry of the Spirit, the Spirit of God whose mission it is to bring the words and work of Jesus to life in the minds of the disciples, and this is the ministry of life. Jesus says,

It is the Spirit who gives life ... the words that I speak to you are Spirit, and they are Life. (John 6,63)

Jesus says He will send the Spirit,

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. (John 14,26)

Indeed, this is the ministry of life, because Jesus has overcome death; as Paul says in Romans:

But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter [that is, the Law]. (Romans 7,6)

Fourth, Paul speaks of an enduring glory. Moses' reflected glory faded, and indeed Moses died, but we have an enduring glory, the glory of Jesus, who died but rose from the dead.

Now we have but a foretaste of Jesus' glory. It is not the glory that the world knows, and indeed it seems weak and puny in comparison to what the

world believes is glorious. But in the words of forgiveness, of reconciliation, there is glory.

And this is a glory that we shall share fully in the resurrection. While in this mortal life we shall die, believing in Jesus we shall be raised just as Jesus is the First Fruits of them who rose from the dead in the glory of the Father.

Indeed, as Paul writes of death and resurrection

it is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body, it shall be raised in glory. (1 Corinthians 15,43)

This is a glory which endures and which we share on account of Jesus. And Paul's ministry, because it shares this enduring glory, we see that:

3) The Spirit Of Life Endures. This ministry which is centered in the Spirit of Christ's Life which Paul has been given, is also given to each one of us; not on our own sufficiency, but because of Jesus' sufficiency, and this ministry is one which shall endure.

Throughout this section of Scripture, Paul has made some great contrasts between Death and Life.

On the one side, Paul has clearly shown what characterizes the a ministry centered in the Letter of Death. These are:

Self-Sufficiency,
the Old Covenant,
the Ministry of Condemnation, and
the Fading Glory.

All of these are focused on the Law and the self as ways to get to God — but rather than leading to God, these all lead to spiritual and eternal death.

On the other side, Paul has clearly shown what characterizes the Life in the Spirit ministry, that is:

God's Sufficiency,
the New Covenant,
the Ministry of the Spirit, and
the Enduring Glory.

All of these have as their focus God reaching out to us through His Son, Jesus. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus took upon Himself our sins and won forgiveness for us, which in turn gives us life, life with God now and life with God eternally.

This passage also teaches us that all Scripture is divided into the Law and the Gospel.

The Law shows us what God demands. Because it is impossible to please God because of these demands, He has given us the Gospel.

The Gospel shows us what Christ has done for us.

The danger that has always faced the Church is that teachers will confuse and mingle the Law and the Gospel. This mingling transforms what was a ministry of Life in the Gospel into a ministry of Death.

People further confuse this when they believe that somehow the letter always kills and the Spirit makes alive. Thus Luther condemned the enthusiasts of his day who believed that they did not need the Scriptures, because the "letter kills," but relied on so-called direct revelation.

But the letters which Paul are speaking about is the Law. While the Spirit uses the Law to condemn sin and drive the sinner to repentance, the Spirit also works through the letters of the Gospel, which is written throughout the Old and the New Testament. Indeed, Jesus speaks of this,

Search the Scriptures because in them you think you have eternal life; but

they are they which testify of Me. (John 5,39)

Here Jesus is speaking of what we call the Old Testament. He is speaking about dividing the Words of Death from the Words of Life. The Words of Life point to the promise of God which shall come in Jesus.

When we read the Scriptures with the Spirit's aid, we find the Words of Life, the Words of Forgiveness. There is no contradiction here. The Spirit uses these letters. And John says of his writings, of his letters,

but these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing you may have life in His name. (John 20,31)

Thus, there is no false distinction, as some would have it, written words bad, spoken words good. Rather, the distinction is always between Law and Gospel, Death and Life.

Conclusion. Thank God that He has given us a ministry that is a ministry of life. This ministry always finds its focus in Jesus and what He has done and is doing for each of us, daily forgiving us, daily giving us life in the face of death. This ministry endures, for as Jesus says,

Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

St. Stephen Lutheran Church of the East Bay & Central Valley
21290 Birch St.
Hayward, CA 94541-1538

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