

THE TWOFOLD USE OF THE LAW & GOSPEL:  
LETTER & SPIRIT

BY  
MARTIN LUTHER  
(1483-1546)

Copyright (Public Domain)

[www.reformedontheweb.com/home/.html](http://www.reformedontheweb.com/home/.html)

(Reformed on the Web)

# THE TWOFOLD USE OF THE LAW & GOSPEL: LETTER & SPIRIT

## TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

**TEXT: 2 CORINTHIANS 3:4-11.**

*4. And such confidence have we through Christ to God-ward: 5. not that we are sufficient of ourselves, to account anything as from ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God; 6. who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. 7. But if the ministration of death, written, and engraven on stones, came with glory, so that the children of Israel could not look steadfastly upon the face of Moses for the glory of his face; which glory was passing away: 8. how shall not rather the ministration of the spirit be with glory? 9. For if the ministration of condemnation hath glory, much rather doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory. 10. For verily that which hath been made glorious hath not been made glorious in this respect, by reason of the glory that surpasseth. 11. For if that which passeth away was with glory, much more that which remaineth is in glory.*

### GOSPEL TRANSCENDS LAW

**1.** This epistle lesson sounds altogether strange and wonderful to individuals unaccustomed to Scripture language, particularly to that of Paul. To the inexperienced ear and heart it is not intelligible. In popedom thus far it has remained quite unapprehended, although reading of the words has been practiced.

**2.** That we may understand it, we must first get an idea of Paul's theme. Briefly, he would oppose the vain boasting of false apostles and preachers concerning their possession of the spirit and their peculiar skill and gifts, by praising and glorifying the office of a preacher of the Gospel with which he is intrusted. For he found that, especially in the Church at Corinth, which he had converted by the words of his own lips and brought to faith in Christ, soon after his departure the devil introduced his heresies whereby the people were turned from the truth and betrayed into other ways. Since it became his

duty to make an attack upon such heresies, he devoted both his epistles to the purpose of keeping the Corinthians in the right way, so that they might retain the pure doctrine received from him, and beware of false spirits. The main thing which moved him to write this second epistle was his desire to emphasize to them his apostolic office of a preacher of the Gospel, in order to put to shame the glory of those other teachers — the glory they boasted with many words and great pretense.

**3.** He starts in on this theme just before he reaches our text. And this is how it is he comes to speak in high terms of praise of the ministration of the Gospel and to contrast and compare the twofold ministration or message which may be proclaimed in the Church, provided, of course, that God's Word is to be preached and not the nonsense of human falsehood and the doctrine of the devil. One is that of the Old Testament, the other of the New; in other words, the office of Moses, or the Law, and the office of the Gospel of Christ. He contrasts the glory and power of the latter with those of the former, which, it is true, is also the Word of God. In this manner he endeavors to defeat the teachings and pretensions of those seductive spirits who, as he but lately foretold, pervert God's Word, in that they greatly extol the Law of God, yet at best do not teach its right use, but, instead of making it tributary to faith in Christ, misuse it to teach work-righteousness.

**4.** Since the words before us are in reality a continuation of those with which the chapter opens, the latter must be considered in this connection.

We read:

“Are we beginning again to commend ourselves? Or need we, as do some, epistles of commendation to you or from you? Ye are our epistle, written in our hearts, known and read of all men; being made manifest that ye are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in tables that are hearts of flesh.” “We, my fellow-apostles and co-laborers and I,” he says, “do not ask for letters and seals from others commending us to you, or from you commending us to others, in order to seduce people after gaining their good will in your church and in others as well. Such is the practice of the false apostles, and many even now present letters and certificates from honest preachers and Churches, and make them the means whereby their unrighteous plotting may be received in good

faith. Such letters, thank God, we stand not in need of, and you need not fear we shall use such means of deception. For you are yourselves the letter we have written and wherein we may pride ourselves and which we present everywhere. For it is a matter of common knowledge that you have been taught by us, and brought to Christ through our ministry.”

### PAUL’S CONVERTS LIVING EPISTLES

**5.** Inasmuch as his activity among them is his testimonial, and they themselves are aware that through his ministerial office he has constituted them a church, he calls them an epistle written by himself; not with ink and in paragraphs, not on paper or wood, nor engraved upon hard rock as the Ten Commandments written upon tables of stone, which Moses placed before the people, but written by the Holy Spirit upon fleshly tables — hearts of tender flesh. The Spirit is the ink or the inscription, yes, even the writer himself; but the pencil or pen and the hand of the writer is the ministry of Paul.

**6.** This figure of a written epistle is, however, in accord with Scripture usage. Moses commands (Deuteronomy 6:6-9; 11, 18) that the Israelites write the Ten Commandments in all places where they walked or stood — upon the posts of their houses, and upon their gates, and ever have them before their eyes and in their hearts. Again (Proverbs 7:2-3), Solomon says: “Keep my commandments and . . . my law as the apple of thine eye. Bind them upon thy fingers; write them upon the tablet of thy heart.” He speaks as a father to his child when giving the child an earnest charge to remember a certain thing — “Dear child, remember this; forget it not; keep it in thy heart.” Likewise, God says in the book of Jeremiah the prophet (Jeremiah 31:33), “I will put my law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it.” Here man’s heart is represented as a sheet, or slate, or page, whereon is written the preached Word; for the heart is to receive and securely keep the Word. In this sense Paul says: “We have, by our ministry, written a booklet or letter upon your heart, which witnesses that you believe in God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost and have the assurance that through Christ you are redeemed and saved. This testimony is what is written on your heart. The letters are not characters traced with ink or crayon, but the living thoughts, the fire and force of the heart.

**7.** Note further, that it is his ministry to which Paul ascribes the preparation

of their heart thereon and the inscription which constitutes them “living epistles of Christ.” He contrasts his ministry with the blind fancies of those fanatics who seek to receive, and dream of having, the Holy Spirit without the oral word; who, perchance, creep into a corner and grasp the Spirit through dreams, directing the people away from the preached Word and visible ministry. But Paul says that the Spirit, through his preaching, has wrought in the hearts of his Corinthians, to the end that Christ lives and is mighty in them. After such statement he bursts into praise of the ministerial office, comparing the message, or preaching, of Moses with that of himself and the apostles. He says:

“Such confidence have we through Christ to God-ward: not that we are sufficient of ourselves, to account anything as from ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God.”

### **TRUE PREACHERS COMMISSIONED BY GOD**

**8.** These words are blows and thrusts for the false apostles and preachers. Paul is mortal enemy to the blockheads who make great boast, pretending to what they do not possess and to what they cannot do; who boast of having the Spirit in great measure; who are ready to counsel and aid the whole world; who pride themselves on the ability to invent something new. It is to be a surpassingly precious and heavenly thing they are to spin out of their heads, as the dreams of pope and monks have been in time past.

“We do not so,” says Paul. “We rely not upon ourselves or our wisdom and ability. We preach not what we have ourselves invented. But this is our boast and trust in Christ before God, that we have made of you a divine epistle; have written upon your hearts, not our thoughts, but the Word of God. We are not, however, glorifying our own power, but the works and the power of him who has called and equipped us for such an office; from whom proceeds all you have heard and believed.

**9.** It is a glory which every preacher may claim, to be able to say with full confidence of heart: “This trust have I toward God in Christ, that what I teach and preach is truly the Word of God.” Likewise, when he performs other official duties in the Church — baptizes a child, absolves and comforts a sinner — it must be done in the same firm conviction that such is the command of Christ.

**10.** He who would teach and exercise authority in the Church without this glory, “it is profitable for him,” as Christ says (Matthew 18:6), “that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depths of the sea.” For the devil’s lies he preaches, and death is what he effects. Our Papists, in time past, after much and long-continued teaching, after many inventions and works whereby they hoped to be saved, nevertheless always doubted in heart and mind whether or no they had pleased God. The teaching and works of all heretics and seditious spirits certainly do not bespeak for them trust in Christ; their own glory is the object of their teaching, and the homage and praise of the people is the goal of their desire.

*“Not that we are sufficient of ourselves,  
to account anything as from ourselves.”*

**11.** As said before, this is spoken in denunciation of the false spirits who believe that by reason of eminent equipment of special creation and election, they are called to come to the rescue of the people, expecting wonders from whatever they say and do.

### **HUMAN DOCTRINE NO PLACE IN THE CHURCH**

**12.** Now, we know ourselves to be of the same clay whereof they are made; indeed, we perhaps have the greater call from God: yet we cannot boast of being capable of ourselves to advise or aid men. We cannot even originate an idea calculated to give help. And when it comes to the knowledge of how one may stand before God and attain to eternal life, that is truly not to be achieved by our work or power, nor to originate in our brain. In other things, those pertaining to this temporal life, you may glory in what you know, you may advance the teachings of reason, you may invent ideas of your own; for example: how to make shoes or clothes, how to govern a household, how to manage a herd. In such things exercise your mind to the best of your ability. Cloth or leather of this sort will permit itself to be stretched and cut according to the good pleasure of the tailor or shoemaker. But in spiritual matters, human reasoning certainly is not in order; other intelligence, other skill and power, are requisite here — something to be granted by God himself and revealed through his Word.

**13.** What mortal has ever discovered or fathomed the truth that the three persons in the eternal divine essence are one God; that the second person, the

Son of God, was obliged to become man, born of a virgin; and that no way of life could be opened for us, save through his crucifixion? Such truth never would have been heard nor preached, would never in all eternity have been published, learned and believed, had not God himself revealed it.

**14.** For this season they are blind fools of first magnitude and dangerous characters who would boast of their grand performances, and think that the people are served when they preach their own fancies and inventions. It has been the practice in the Church for anyone to introduce any teaching he saw fit; for example, the monks and priests have daily produced new saints, pilgrimages, special prayers, works and sacrifices in the effort to blot out sin, redeem souls from purgatory, and so on. They who make up things of this kind are not such as put their trust in God through Christ, but rather such as defy God and Christ. Into the hearts of men, where Christ alone should be, they shove the filth and write the lies of the devil. Yet they think themselves, and themselves only, qualified for all essential teaching and work, self-grown doctors that they are, saints all-powerful without the help of God and Christ.

***“But our sufficiency is from God.”***

**15.** Of ourselves — in our own wisdom and strength — we cannot effect, discover nor teach any counsel or help for man, whether for ourselves or others. Any good work we perform among you, any doctrine we write upon your heart — that is God’s own work. He puts into our heart and mouth what we should say, and impresses it upon your heart through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we cannot ascribe to ourselves any honor therein, cannot seek our own glory as the self-instructed and proud spirits do; we must give to God alone the honor, and must glory in the fact that by his grace and power he works in you unto salvation, through the office committed unto us.

**16.** Now, Paul’s thought here is that nothing should be taught and practiced in the Church but what is unquestionably God’s Word. It will not do to introduce or perform anything whatever upon the strength of man’s judgment. Man’s achievements, man’s reasoning and power, are of no avail save in so far as they come from God. As Peter says in his first epistle (1 Peter 4:11): “If any man speaketh, speaking as it were oracles of God; if any man ministereth, ministering as of the strength which God supplieth.” In short, let him who would be wise, who would boast of great skill, talents and power, confine himself to things other than spiritual; with respect to spiritual



matters, let him keep his place and refrain from boasting and pretense. For it is of no moment that men observe your greatness and ability; the important thing is that poor souls may rest assured of being presented with God's Word and works, whereby they may be saved.

“Who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.”

### THE NEW COVENANT

**17.** Paul here proceeds to exalt the office and power of the Gospel over the glorying of the false apostles, and to elevate the power of the Word above that of all other doctrine, even of the Law of God. Truly we are not sufficient of ourselves and have nothing to boast of so far as human activity is considered. For that is without merit or power, however strenuous the effort may be to fulfill God's Law. We have, however, something infinitely better to boast of, something not grounded in our own activity: by God we have been made sufficient for a noble ministry, termed the ministry “of a New Covenant.” This ministry is not only exalted far above any teaching to be evolved by human wisdom, skill and power, but is more glorious than the ministry termed the “Old Covenant,” which in time past was delivered to the Jews through Moses. While this ministry clings, in common with other doctrine, to the Word given by revelation, it is the agency whereby the Holy Spirit works in the heart. Therefore, Paul says it is not a ministration of the letter, but “of the spirit.”

### “SPIRIT” AND “LETTER”

**18.** This passage relative to spirit and letter has in the past been wholly strange language to us. Indeed, to such extent has man's nonsensical interpretation perverted and weakened it that I, through a learned doctor of the holy Scriptures, failed to understand it altogether, and I could find no one to teach me. And to this day it is unintelligible to all popedom. In fact, even the old teachers — Origen, Jerome and others — have not caught Paul's thought. And no wonder, truly! For it is essentially a doctrine far beyond the power of man's intelligence to comprehend. When human reason meddles with it, it becomes perplexed. The doctrine is wholly unintelligible to it, for human thought goes no farther than the Law and the Ten Commandments. Laying hold upon these it confines itself to them. It does not attempt to do more, being governed by the principle that unto him who fulfils the demands

of the Law, or commandments, God is gracious. Reason knows nothing about the wretchedness of depraved nature. It does not recognize the fact that no man is able to keep God's commandments; that all are under sin and condemnation; and that the only way whereby help could be received was for God to give his Son for the world, ordaining another ministration, one through which grace and reconciliation might be proclaimed to us. Now, he who does not understand the sublime subject of which Paul speaks cannot but miss the true meaning of his words. How much more did we invite this fate when we threw the Scriptures and Saint Paul's epistles under the bench, and, like swine in husks, wallowed in man's nonsense! Therefore, we must submit to correction and learn to understand the apostle's utterance aright.

**19.** "Letter" and "spirit" have been understood to mean, according to Origen and Jerome, the obvious sense of the written word. St. Augustine, it must be admitted, has gotten an inkling of the truth. Now, the position of the former teachers would perhaps not be quite incorrect did they correctly explain the words. By "literary sense" they signify the meaning of a Scripture narrative according to the ordinary interpretation of the words. By "spiritual sense" they signify the secondary, hidden, sense found in the words.

For instance: The Scripture narrative in Genesis third records how the serpent persuaded the woman to eat of the forbidden fruit and to give to her husband, who also ate. This narrative in its simplest meaning represents what they understand by "letter." "Spirit," however, they understand to mean the spiritual interpretation, which is thus: The serpent signifies the evil temptation which lures to sin. The woman represents the sensual state, or the sphere in which such enticements and temptations make themselves felt. Adam, the man, stands for reason, which is called man's highest endowment. Now, when reason does not yield to the allurements of external sense, all is well; but when it permits itself to waver and consent, the fall has taken place.

**20.** Origen was the first to trifle thus with the holy Scriptures, and many others followed, until now it is thought to be the sign of great cleverness for the Church to be filled with such quibblings. The aim is to imitate Paul, who (Galatians 4:22-24) figuratively interprets the story of Abraham's two sons, the one by the free woman, or the mistress of the house, and the other by the hand-maid. The two women, Paul says, represent the two covenants: one covenant makes only bondservants, which is just what he in our text terms

the ministration of the letter; the other leads to liberty, or, as he says here, the ministration of the spirit, which gives life. And the two sons are the two peoples, one of which does not go farther than the Law, while the other accepts in faith the Gospel. True, this is an interpretation not directly suggested by the narrative and the text. Paul himself calls it an allegory; that is, a mystic narrative, or a story with a hidden meaning. But he does not say that the literal text is necessarily the letter that killeth, and the allegory, or hidden meaning, the spirit. But the false teachers assert of all Scripture that the text, or record itself, is but a dead “letter,” its interpretation being “the spirit.” Yet they have not pushed interpretation farther than the teaching of the Law; and it is precisely the Law which Paul means when he speaks of “the letter.”

**21.** Paul employs the word “letter” in such contemptuous sense in reference to the Law — though the Law is, nevertheless, the Word of God — when he compares it with the ministry of the Gospel. The letter is to him the doctrine of the Ten Commandments, which teach how we should obey God, honor parents, love our neighbor, and so on — the very best doctrine to be found in all books, sermons and schools.

The word “letter” is to the apostle Paul everything which may take the form of doctrine of literary arrangement, of record, so long as it remains something spoken or written. Also thoughts which may be pictured or expressed by word or writing, but it is not that which is written in the heart, to become its life. “Letter” is the whole Law of Moses, or the Ten Commandments, though the supreme authority of such teaching is not denied. It matters not whether you hear them, read them, or reproduce them mentally. For instance, when I sit down to meditate upon the first commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” or the second, or the third, and so forth, I have something which I can read, write, discuss, and aim to fulfill with all my might. The process is quite similar when the emperor or prince gives a command and says: “This you shall do, that you shall eschew.” This is what the apostle calls “the letter,” or, as we have called it on another occasion, the written sense.

**22.** Now, as opposed to “the letter,” there is another doctrine or message, which he terms the “ministration of a New Covenant” and “of the Spirit.” This doctrine does not teach what works are required of man, for that man has already heard; but it makes known to him what God would do for him

and bestow upon him, indeed what he has already done: he has given his Son Christ for us; because, for our disobedience to the Law, which no man fulfils, we were under God's wrath and condemnation. Christ made satisfaction for our sins, effected a reconciliation with God and gave to us his own righteousness. Nothing is said in this ministration of man's deeds; it tells rather of the works of Christ, who is unique in that he was born of a virgin, died for sin and rose from the dead, something no other man has been able to do. This doctrine is revealed through none but the Holy Spirit, and none other confers the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works in the hearts of them who hear and accept the doctrine. Therefore, this ministration is termed a ministration "of the Spirit."

**23.** The apostle employs the words "letter" and "spirit," to contrast the two doctrines; to emphasize his office and show its advantage over all others, however eminent the teachers whom they boast, and however great the spiritual unction which they vaunt. It is of design that he does not term the two dispensations "Law" and "Gospel," but names them according to the respective effects produced. He honors the Gospel with a superior term — "ministration of the spirit." Of the Law, on the contrary, he speaks almost contemptuously, as if he would not honor it with the title of God's commandment, which in reality it is, according to his own admission later on that its deliverance to Moses and its injunction upon the children of Israel was an occasion of surpassing glory.

**24.** Why does Paul choose this method? Is it right for one to despise or dishonor God's Law? Is not a chaste and honorable life a matter of beauty and godliness? Such facts, it may be contended, are implanted by God in reason itself, and all books teach them; they are the governing force in the world. I reply: Paul's chief concern is to defeat the vainglory and pretensions of false preachers, and to teach them the right conception and appreciation of the Gospel which he proclaimed. What Paul means is this: When the Jews vaunt their Law of Moses, which was received as Law from God and recorded upon two tables of stone; when they vaunt their learned and saintly preachers of the Law and its exponents, and hold their deeds and manner of life up to admiration, what is all that compared to the Gospel message? The claim may be well made: a fine sermon, a splendid exposition; but, after all, nothing more comes of it than precepts, expositions, written comments. The precept, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy

neighbor as thyself,” remains a mere array of words. When much time and effort have been spent in conforming one’s life to it, nothing has been accomplished. You have pods without peas, husks without kernels.

**25.** For it is impossible to keep the Law without Christ, though man may, for the sake of honor or property, or from fear of punishment, feign outward holiness. The heart which does not discern God’s grace in Christ cannot turn to God nor trust in him; it cannot love his commandments and delight in them, but rather resists them. For nature rebels at compulsion. No man likes to be a captive in chains. One does not voluntarily bow to the rod of punishment or submit to the executioner’s sword; rather, because of these things, his anger against the Law is but increased, and he ever thinks: “Would that I might unhindered steal, rob, hoard, gratify my lust, and so on!” And when restrained by force, he would there were no Law and no God. And this is the case where conduct shows some effects of discipline, in that the outer man has been subjected to the teaching of the Law.

**26.** But in a far more appalling degree does inward rebellion ensue when the heart feels the full force of the Law; when, standing before God’s judgment, it feels the sentence of condemnation; as we shall presently hear, for the apostle says “the letter killeth.” Then the truly hard knots appear. Human nature fumes and rages against the Law; offenses appear in the heart, the fruit of hate and enmity against the Law; and presently human nature flees before God and is incensed at God’s judgment. It begins to question the equity of his dealings, to ask if he is a just God. Influenced by such thoughts, it falls ever deeper into doubt, it murmurs and chafes, until finally, unless the Gospel comes to the rescue, it utterly despairs, as did Judas, and Saul, and perhaps pass out of this life with God and creation. This is what Paul means when he says (Romans 7:8-9) that the Law works sin in the heart of man, and sin works death, or kills.

**27.** You see, then, why the Law is called “the letter”: though noble doctrine, it remains on the surface; it does not enter the heart as a vital force which begets obedience. Such is the baseness of human nature, it will not and cannot conform to the Law; and so corrupt is mankind, there is no individual who does not violate all God’s commandments inspite of daily hearing the preached Word and having held up to view God’s wrath and eternal condemnation. Indeed, the harder pressed man is, the more furiously he

storms against the Law.

**28.** The substance of the matter is this: When all the commandments have been put together, when their message receives every particle of praise to which it is entitled, it is still a mere letter. That is, teaching not put into practice. By “letter” is signified all manner of law, doctrine and message, which goes no farther than the oral or written word, which consists only of the powerless letter. To illustrate: A law promulgated by a prince or the authorities of a city, if not enforced, remains merely an open letter, which makes a demand indeed, but ineffectually. Similarly, God’s Law, although a teaching of supreme authority and the eternal will of God, must suffer itself to become a mere empty letter or husk. Without a quickening heart, and devoid of fruit, the Law is powerless to effect life and salvation. It may well be called a veritable table of omissions (Lass-tafel); that is, it is a written enumeration, not of duties performed but of duties cast aside. In the languages of the world, it is a royal edict which remains unobserved and unperformed. In this light St. Augustine understood the Law. He says, commenting on Psalm 17, “What is Law without grace but a letter without spirit?” Human nature, without the aid of Christ and his grace, cannot keep it.

**29.** Again, Paul in terming the Gospel a “ministration of the spirit” would call attention to its power to produce in the hearts of men an effect wholly different from that of the Law: it is accompanied by the Holy Spirit and it creates a new heart. Man, driven into fear and anxiety by the preaching of the Law, hears this Gospel message, which, instead of reminding him of God’s demands, tells him what God has done for him. It points not to man’s works, but to the works of Christ, and bids him confidently believe that for the sake of his Son God will forgive his sins and accept him as his child. And this message, when received in faith, immediately cheers and comforts the heart. The heart will no longer flee from God; rather it turns to him. Finding grace with God and experiencing his mercy, the heart feels drawn to him. It commences to call upon him and to treat and revere him as its beloved God. In proportion as such faith and solace grow, also love for the commandments will grow and obedience to them will be man’s delight. Therefore, God would have his Gospel message urged unceasingly as the means of awakening man’s heart to discern his state and recall the great grace and lovingkindness of God, with the result that the power of the Holy Spirit is increased constantly. Note, no influence of the Law, no work of man is

present here. The force is a new and heavenly one — the power of the Holy Spirit. He impresses upon the heart Christ and his works, making of it a true book which does not consist in the tracery of mere letters and words, but in true life and action.

**30.** God promised of old, in Joel 2:28 and other passages, to give the Spirit through the new message, the Gospel. And he has verified his promise by public manifestations in connection with the preaching of that Gospel, as on the day of Pentecost and again later. When the apostles, Peter and others, began to preach, the Holy Spirit descended visibly from heaven upon their hearts. Acts 8:17; Acts 10:44. Up to that time, throughout the period the Law was preached, no one had heard or seen such manifestation. The fact could not but be grasped that this was a vastly different message from that of the Law when such mighty results followed in its train. And yet its substance was no more than what Paul declared (Acts 13, 38-39): “Through this man is proclaimed unto you remission of sins: and by him every one that believeth is justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.”

**31.** In this teaching you see no more the empty letters, the valueless husks or shells, of the Law, which unceasingly enjoins, “This thou shalt do and observe,” and ever in vain. You see instead the true kernel and power which confers Christ and the fullness of His Spirit. In consequence, men heartily believe the message of the Gospel and enjoy its riches. They are accounted as having fulfilled the Ten Commandments. John says (John 1:16-17): “Of his fullness we all received, and grace for grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” John’s thought is: The Law has indeed been given by Moses, but what avails that fact? To be sure, it is a noble doctrine and portrays a beautiful and instructive picture of man’s duty to God and all mankind; it is really excellent as to the letter. Yet it remains empty; it does not enter into the heart. Therefore it is called “law,” nor can it become aught else, so long as nothing more is given.

### **CHRIST SUPERSEDES MOSES**

Before there can be fulfillment, another than Moses must come, bringing another doctrine. Instead of a law enjoined, there must be grace and truth revealed. For to enjoin a command and to embody the truth\* are two different things; just as teaching and doing differ. Moses, it is true, teaches the doctrine

of the Law, so far as exposition is concerned, but he can neither fulfill it himself nor give others the ability to do so. That it might be fulfilled, God's Son had to come with his fullness; he has fulfilled the Law for himself and it is he who communicates to our empty heart the power to attain to the same fullness.

This becomes possible when we receive grace for grace, that is, when we come to the enjoyment of Christ, and for the sake of him who enjoys with God fullness of grace, although our own obedience to the Law is still imperfect. Being possessed of solace and grace, we receive by his power the Holy Spirit also, so that, instead of harboring mere empty letters within us, we come to the truth and begin to fulfill God's Law, in such a way, however, that we draw from his fullness and drink from that as a fountain.

### **CHRIST THE SOURCE OF LIFE GREATER THAN ADAM THE SOURCE OF DEATH**

**32.** Paul gives us the same thought in Romans 5, 17-18, where he compares Adam and Christ. Adam, he says, by his disobedience in Paradise, became the source of sin and death in the world; by the sin of this one man, condemnation passed upon all men. But on the other hand, Christ, by his obedience and righteousness, has become for us the abundant source wherefrom all may obtain righteousness and the power of obedience. And with respect to the latter source, it is far richer and more abundant than the former. While by the single sin of one man, sin and death passed upon all men, to wax still more powerful with the advent of the Law, of such surpassing strength and greatness, on the other hand, is the grace and bounty which we have in Christ that it not only washes away the particular sin of the one man Adam, which, until Christ came, overwhelmed all men in death, but overwhelms and blots out all sin whatever. Thus they who receive his fullness of grace and bounty unto righteousness are, according to Paul, lords of life through Jesus Christ alone.

### **THE LAW INEFFECTUAL**

**33.** You see now how the two messages differ, and why Paul exalts the one, the preaching of the Gospel, and calls it a "ministration of the spirit," but terms the other, the Law, a mere empty "letter." His object is to humble the pride of the false apostles and preachers which they felt in their Judaism and the law of Moses, telling the people with bold pretensions: "Beloved, let Paul



preach what he will, he cannot overthrow Moses, who on Mount Sinai received the Law, God's irrevocable command, obedience to which is ever the only way to salvation."

**34.** Similarly today, Papists, Anabaptists and other sects make outcry: "What mean you by preaching so much about faith and Christ? Are the people thereby made better? Surely works are essential." Arguments of this character have indeed a semblance of merit, but, when examined by the light of truth, are mere empty, worthless twaddle. For if deeds, or works, are to be considered, there are the Ten Commandments; we teach and practice these as well as they. The Commandments would answer the purpose indeed — if one could preach them so effectively as to compel their fulfilment.

But the question is, whether what is preached is also practiced. Is there something more than mere words — or letters, as Paul says? Do the words result in life and spirit? This message we have in common; unquestionably, one must teach the Ten Commandments, and, what is more, live them. But we charge that they are not observed. Therefore something else is requisite in order to render obedience to them possible. When Moses and the Law are made to say: "You should do thus; God demands this of you," what does it profit? Ay, beloved Moses, I hear that plainly, and it is certainly a righteous command; but pray tell me whence shall I obtain ability to do what, alas, I never have done nor can do? It is not easy to spend money from an empty pocket, or to drink from an empty can. If I am to pay my debt, or to quench my thirst, tell me how first to fill pocket or can. But upon this point such prattlers are silent; they but continue to drive and plague with the Law, let the people stick to their sins, and make merry of them to their own hurt.

**35.** In this light Paul here portrays the false apostles and like pernicious schismatics, who make great boasts of having a clearer understanding and of knowing much better what to teach than is the case with true preachers of the Gospel. And when they do their very best, when they pretend great things, and do wonders with their preaching, there is naught but the mere empty "letter." Indeed, their message falls far short of Moses. Moses was a noble preacher, truly, and wrought greater things than any of them may do. Nevertheless, the doctrine of the Law could do no more than remain a letter, an Old Testament, and God had to ordain a different doctrine, a New Testament, which should impart the "spirit."

“It is the letter,” says Paul, “which we preach. If any glorying is to be done, we can glory in better things and make the defiant plea that they are not the only teachers of what ought to be done, incapable as they are of carrying out their own precepts. We give direction and power as to performing and living those precepts. For this reason our message is not called the Old Testament, or the message of the dead letter, but that of the New Testament and of the living Spirit.”

**36.** No seditious spirit, it is certain, ever carries out its own precepts, nor will he ever be capable of doing so, though he may loudly boast the Spirit alone as his guide. Of this fact you may rest assured. For such individuals know nothing more than the doctrine of works — nor can they rise higher and point you to anything else. They may indeed speak of Christ, but it is only to hold him up as an example of patience in suffering. In short, there can be no New Testament preached if the doctrine of faith in Christ be left out; the spirit cannot enter into the heart, but all teaching, endeavor, reflection, works and power remain mere “letters,” devoid of grace, truth, and life. Without Christ the heart remains unchanged and unrenewed. It has no more power to fulfill the Law than the book in which the Ten Commandments are written, or the stones upon which engraved.

*“For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.”*

**37.** Here is yet stronger condemnation of the glory of the doctrine of the Law; yet higher exaltation of the Gospel ministry. Is the apostle overbold in that he dares thus to assail the Law and say: “The Law is not only a lifeless letter, but qualified merely to kill”? Surely that is not calling the Law a good and profitable message, but one altogether harmful. Who, unless he would be a cursed heretic in the eyes of the world and invite execution as a blasphemer, would dare to speak thus, except Paul himself? Even Paul must praise the Law, which is God’s command, declaring it good and not to be despised nor in any way modified, but to be confirmed and fulfilled so completely, as Christ says (Matthew 5:18), that not a tittle of it shall pass away. How, then, does Paul come to speak so disparagingly, even abusively, of the Law, actually presenting it as veritable death and poison? Well, his is a sublime doctrine, one that reason does not understand. The world, particularly they who would be called holy and godly, cannot tolerate it at all; for it amounts to nothing short of pronouncing all our works, however precious, mere death

and poison.

**38.** Paul's purpose is to bring about the complete overthrow of the boast of the false teachers and hypocrites, and to reveal the weakness of their doctrine, showing how little it effects even at its best, since it offers only the Law, Christ remaining unproclaimed and unknown. They say in terms of vainglorious eloquence that if a man diligently keep the commandments and do many good works, he shall be saved. But theirs are only vain words, a pernicious doctrine. This fact is eventually learned by him who, having heard no other doctrine, trusts in their false one. He finds out that it holds neither comfort nor power of life, but only doubt and anxiety, followed by death and destruction.

### **TERRORS OF THE LAW**

**39.** When man, conscious of his failure to keep God's command, is constantly urged by the Law to make payment of his debt and confronted with nothing but the terrible wrath of God and eternal condemnation, he cannot but sink into despair over his sins. Such is the inevitable consequence where the Law alone is taught with a view to attaining heaven thereby. The vanity of such trust in works is illustrated in the case of the noted hermit mentioned in *Vitae Patrum* (Lives of the Fathers). For over seventy years this hermit had led a life of utmost austerity, and had many followers. When the hour of death came he began to tremble, and for three days was in a state of agony. His disciples came to comfort him, exhorting him to die in peace since he had led so holy a life. But he replied: "Alas, I truly have all my life served Christ and lived austere; but God's judgment greatly differs from that of men."

**40.** Note, this worthy man, despite the holiness of his life, has no acquaintance with any article but that of the divine judgment according to the Law. He knows not the comfort of Christ's Gospel. After a long life spent in the attempt to keep God's commandments and secure salvation, the Law now slays him through his own works. He is compelled to exclaim: "Alas, who knows how God will look upon my efforts? Who may stand before him?" That means, to forfeit heaven through the verdict of his own conscience. The work he has wrought and his holiness of life avail nothing. They merely push him deeper into death, since he is without the solace of the Gospel, while others, such as the thief on the cross and the publican, grasp the comfort of

the Gospel, the forgiveness of sins in Christ. Thus sin is conquered; they escape the sentence of the Law, and pass through death into life eternal.

### EFFICACY OF THE GOSPEL

**41.** Now the meaning of the contrasting clause, “the spirit giveth life,” becomes clear. The reference is to naught else but the holy Gospel, a message of healing and salvation; a precious, comforting word. It comforts and refreshes the sad heart. It wrests it out of the jaws of death and hell, as it were, and transports it to the certain hope of eternal life, through faith in Christ. When the last hour comes to the believer, and death and God’s judgment appear before his eyes, he does not base his comfort upon his works. Even though he may have lived the holiest life possible, he says with Paul (1 Corinthians 4:4): “I know nothing against myself, yet am I not hereby justified.”

**42.** These words imply being ill pleased with self, with the whole life; indeed, even the putting to death of self. Though the heart says, “By my works I am neither made righteous nor saved,” which is practically admitting oneself to be worthy of death and condemnation, the Spirit extricates from despair, through the Gospel faith, which confesses, as did St. Bernard in the hour of death: “Dear Lord Jesus, I am aware that my life at its best has been but worthy of condemnation, but I trust in the fact that thou hast died for me and hast sprinkled me with blood from thy holy wounds. For I have been baptized in thy name and have given heed to thy Word whereby thou hast called me, awarded me grace and life, and bidden me believe. In this assurance will I pass out of life; not in uncertainty and anxiety, thinking, Who knows what sentence God in heaven will pass upon me?”

The Christian must not utter such a question. The sentence against his life and works has long since been passed by the Law. Therefore, he must confess himself guilty and condemned. But he lives by the gracious judgment of God declared from heaven, whereby the sentence of the Law is overruled and reversed. It is this: “He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life.” John 3:36.

**43.** When the consolation of the Gospel has once been received and it has wrested the heart from death and the terrors of hell, the Spirit’s influence is felt. By its power God’s Law begins to live in man’s heart; he loves it, delights in it and enters upon its fulfillment. Thus eternal life begins here, being continued forever and perfected in the life to come.

**44.** Now you see how much more glorious, how much better, is the doctrine of the apostles — the New Testament — than the doctrine of those who preach merely great works and holiness without Christ. We should see in this fact an incentive to hear the Gospel with gladness. We ought joyfully to thank God for it when we learn how it has power to bring to men life and eternal salvation, and when it gives us assurance that the Holy Spirit accompanies it and is imparted to believers.

“But if the ministration of death, written, and engraven on stones, came with glory, so that the children of Israel could not look steadfastly upon the face of Moses for the glory of his face; which glory was passing away: how shall not rather the ministration of the Spirit be with glory? For if the ministration of condemnation hath glory, much rather doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory.”

### **GLORY OF THE GOSPEL**

**45.** Paul is in an ecstasy of delight, and his heart overflows in words of praise for the Gospel. Again he handles the Law severely, calling it a ministration, or doctrine, of death and condemnation. What term significant of greater abomination could he apply to God’s Law than to call it a doctrine of death and hell? And again (Galatians 2:17), he calls it a “minister (or preacher) of sin ;” and (Galatians 3:10) the message which proclaims a curse, saying, “As many as are of the works of the law are under a curse.” Absolute, then, is the conclusion that Law and works are powerless to justify before God; for how can a doctrine proclaiming only sin, death and condemnation justify and save?

**46.** Paul is compelled to speak thus, as we said above because of the infamous presumption of both teachers and pupils, in that they permit flesh and blood to coquet with the Law, and make their own works which they bring before God their boast. Yet, nothing is effected but self-deception and destruction. For, when the Law is viewed in its true light, when its “glory,” as Paul has it, is revealed, it is found to do nothing more than to kill man and sink him into condemnation.

**47.** Therefore, the Christian will do well to learn this text of Paul and have an armor against the boasting of false teachers, and the torments and trials of the devil when he urges the Law and induces men to seek righteousness in their own works, tormenting their heart with the thought that salvation is depen-

dent upon the achievements of the individual. The Christian will do well to learn this text, I say, so that in such conflicts he may take the devil's own sword, saying: "Why dost thou annoy me with talk of the Law and my works? What is the Law after all, however much you may preach it to me, but that which makes me feel the weight of sin, death and condemnation? Why should I seek therein righteousness before God?"

**48.** When Paul speaks of the "glory of the Law," of which the Jewish teachers of work-righteousness boast, he has reference to the things narrated in the twentieth and thirty-fourth chapters of Exodus — how, when the Law was given, God descended in majesty and glory from heaven, and there were thunderings and lightnings, and the mountain was encircled with fire; and how when Moses returned from the mountain, bringing the Law, his face shone with a glory so dazzling that the people could not look upon his face and he was obliged to veil it.

**49.** Turning their glory against them, Paul says: "Truly, we do not deny the glory; splendor and majesty were there: but what does such glory do but compel souls to flee before God, and drive into death and hell? We believers, however, boast another glory, — that of our ministration. The Gospel record tells us (Matthew 17:2-4) that Christ clearly revealed such glory to his disciples when his face shone as the sun, and Moses and Elijah were present. Before the manifestation of such glory, the disciples did not flee; they beheld with amazed joy and said: "Lord, it is good for us to be here. We will make here tabernacles for thee and for Moses," etc.

**50.** Compare the two scenes and you will understand plainly the import of Paul's words here. As before said, this is the substance of his meaning: "The Law produces naught but terror and death when it dazzles the heart with its glory and stands revealed in its true nature. On the other hand, the Gospel yields comfort and joy." But to explain in detail the signification of the veiled face of Moses, and of his shining uncovered face, would take too long to enter upon here.

**51.** There is also especial comfort to be derived from Paul's assertion that the "ministration," or doctrine, of the Law "passeth away"; for otherwise there would be naught but eternal condemnation. The doctrine of the Law "passes away" when the preaching of the Gospel of Christ finds place. To Christ, Moses shall yield, that he alone may hold sway. Moses shall not terrify the

conscience of the believer. When, perceiving the glory of Moses, the conscience trembles and despairs before God's wrath, then it is time for Christ's glory to shine with its gracious, comforting light into the heart. Then can the heart endure Moses and Elijah. For the glory of the Law, or the unveiled face of Moses, shall shine only until man is humbled and driven to desire the blessed countenance of Christ. If you come to Christ, you shall no longer hear Moses to your fright and terror; you shall hear him as one who remains servant to the Lord Christ, leaving the solace and the joy of his countenance unobscured. In conclusion:

*“For verily that which hath been made glorious hath not been made glorious in this respect, by reason of the glory that surpasseth.”*

**52.** The meaning here is; When the glory and holiness of Christ, revealed through the preaching of the Gospel, is rightly perceived then the glory of the Law — which is but a feeble and transitory glory — is seen to be not really glorious. It is mere dark clouds in contrast to the light of Christ shining to lead us out of sin, death and hell unto God and eternal life.