

## Two Ministrations

*12th Sunday after Trinity*

(From the *Epistle*: 2 Corinthians 2:4-9)

**King James Version:** *4 And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward: 5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; 6 Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. 7 But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away: 8 How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious? 9 For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory.*

**New International Version:** *4 Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. 5 Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. 6 He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant--not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. 7 Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, 8 will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? 9 If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!*

There is hardly a more complex topic for the New Testament scholar than attempting to clarify the relationship of the Old and New Covenants to one another. Even the early church was embroiled in controversy over this matter. Jewish Christians especially strove with it. Newly converted to Christ, they were nevertheless unsure whether some measure of observance of the Mosaic Law was still required. It was as if they were caught betwixt and between: they affirmed that Christ had perfectly fulfilled that Law for them through his death and resurrection, but were yet unable to confidently and securely release themselves completely from the familiarity of the Law's demands and rituals. Only time and events would eventually accomplish the impossible. In 70 A.D. the temple would be destroyed, eliminating the sacrificial system the Law had ordained. Meanwhile the apostles, and especially Paul, labored to instruct the Church through the medium of inspired doctrine about every aspect of the implications of Christ's atoning work. Today's Epistle is one example.

Let's contemplate the Mosaic Law for a few moments. The receiving of the Law on Mt. Sinai by Israel through Moses, many centuries before Christ, was an event absolutely unique in the history of any people. Although God had previously established a covenant with one man Abraham and his immediate descendants the twelve patriarchs, He now determined to bring the entire nation descended from them into intimate contact with Himself. This new community would be identified in part by the Law given solely to them. Quoting Moses:

*"For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon him for? And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?" (Deut. 4:7, 8)*

But the story of Israel's observance of the Law is tragic. Over and over again we hear this refrain in biblical history, so dramatically summarized in the familiar lines of Psalm 106:

*"Our fathers provoked him..."; "They provoked him to anger with their inventions..."; They angered him..."; "Thus were they defiled with their own works, and went a whoring with their own inventions..."; "Therefore was the wrath of the Lord kindled against his people, insomuch that he abhorred his own inheritance...;"*

Scripture does not contain effusive praise by God of His covenanted peoples' record of observance of the Mosaic Law which He had given to them to perform and practice. Rather, it catalogues the breathtaking variety of their open transgressions of it, and the undeserved mercy which is His continual response, even during the great and severe punishments He brought upon them for their disobedience.

But within this difficult history, there is a peculiar category of lovely people, exceptions to the rule, that are indeed given a very high place of regard within the sacred pages. Abraham, long before Sinai, was described by God as one who *obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws* (Gen. 26:5). King David --of all men-- is among them, described by God as a man who *kept His statutes and His commandments* (1 Kings 3:14). We find such men and women in the New Testament, before Christ was even born. Zacharias and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, are described in this fashion: *And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless* (Luke 1:6). Mary is among them as well: after being told by the angel Gabriel that she was *highly favored* is assured that she has *found favor with God* (from Luke 1).

Psalm 119, the longest psalm of all, provides us a key to the hearts of these individuals, represented in such graphic terms in almost every one of the psalm's 176 verses, which are filled with a restless longing for perfection:

2. *Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart.*

4. *Thou hast commanded us to keep thy precepts diligently.*

5. *O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!*

16. *I will delight myself in thy statutes...*

18. *Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.*

127. *I love thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold.*

176. *I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant; for I do not forget thy commandments.*

The critically important element in this group of deeply religious people is their love for God, their faith in Him, and their earnest desire to serve Him, in spite of their shortcomings. They are sincere. If "blameless" or "obedient" is used to describe their observance of the Law, these are measures not so much of quantity, as quality. They have been given the priceless gift of being able to see through the sternness and absoluteness of the Law into the very heart of God itself! And for that, they have been welcomed and received by Him.

But today's Epistle teaches us that *the letter killeth*, and that the Law was a *ministration of death, written and engraven in stones*. What can this possibly mean? How can the Law, which God Himself gave, *kill*, and cause *death*? Elsewhere Paul states in a seemingly contradictory manner that *the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good* (Romans 7:12). The Law proclaims in no uncertain terms the absolute and unchangeable standards that are mandated by a holy God. Since they represent the very nature of God Himself, they cannot be altered. Nor can the condition of all mankind be changed, because we are *in sin*, and we have no power to do anything about it. The only possible hope is in an appeal to the mercy of God, or in a some provision God might sovereignly chooses to offer to address this --for us-- unaddressable dilemma. And so Abraham, and David, and the writer of Psalm 119, and all of the others mentioned above pray continually to God for mercy, always aware that they bear no merit nor good cause with which to make such an appeal, other than hope that God might hear and answer. And they awaited, whether they consciously realized it or not, that provision which God would indeed bring to pass in those days when an angel would appear to Joseph, espoused to Mary, and amazingly proclaim:

*Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. 21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.*

Elsewhere St. Paul summarizes in one verse the end of this great apparent controversy between the Law and the provision of God's grace through His Son:

*...knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. (Gal. 2:16)*

This provision of grace is also called in today's text *the ministration of the spirit*. This simply describes another facet of this great salvation wrought in Christ. Not only are our sins forgiven and the gap separating us from God bridged, but a living, active Person --the Holy Spirit-- is poured into our hearts to effect a new nature there, one with the power to love God, to obey Him, and to make permanent that intimacy with Him which was at the core of those longings which remained so unfulfilled among the Old Testament saints. The radiance of the Holy Spirit far exceeds that which Moses tried to hide after speaking face to face with God. To partake in this new *ministration of the spirit* is a great privilege, indeed.

In summary: the Law is *the ministration of condemnation*. It is *glory* because God authored it, and God is glorious. But it condemns us because it presents to us the nature of a holy God in the form of laws which require our obedience, which, because of what we are --*in sin*-- we cannot offer. We can only hope in God's mercy. Only the proud legalist, like the Pharisees of Jesus' and Paul's day, dared to imagine that they could fulfill the Law, and it has been so with legalists, ever since. But the Gospel is the *ministration of righteousness*, and it is *much more glo-*

*rious* because it is a display of the unconditional, marvelous, multifaceted mercy of God which in one stroke has removed the terrible sentence associated with any violation of the Law, brought a holy God and sinful man together, and provided for us the indwelling power and presence of the Spirit to bring to pass within us the changes that God Himself desires.

Let me close with a great doxology with which the apostle ended another portion of his writings:

***Romans 11:33*** *O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! 34 For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? 35 Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? 36 For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.*

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*