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THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

The world has a craving for lawlessness.

As Romans 8:7 tells us, the natural human mind is enmity against God and not willing to submit to God's laws. The natural human mind fights against the laws of God; it resents the laws of God.

We in God's Church, on the other hand, fully accept that the laws of God are the only way to achieve real peace and happiness. As we have come to understand God's laws, so we have done our best to put them into effect in our own personal lives. But practicing God's laws in an environment which is hostile to those laws can at times be quite difficult, like, for example, keeping the Sabbath in an environment that rejects Sabbath-keeping.

But we have also come to understand that it is not enough for us to keep all of God's laws in the letter. We must also keep the spirit of God's laws. Over the years we have heard the expression "the spirit of the law" many times.

Question: What are the most significant differences between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law?

THE MAIN DIFFERENCES

There are two very important distinctions between "the letter" of the law and "the spirit" of the law. Most people in God's Church understand the one distinction quite well; but most have never given the second distinction much thought. But this second distinction is vital for the process of developing godly character.

Applied to the context of us being members of God's Church, these differences are as follows. As an example let's consider the law that says "you shall not commit adultery".

For the **letter of the law**:

The Church can make the decisions. Thus, if a baptized member of the Church commits adultery, then the Church can decide to disfellowship that person. The Church can make that decision based on clear outside evidence that is available for objective evaluation. That is, it is known that the baptized member committed adultery in a certain situation. And afterwards the Church can also decide to reinstate that person as a member of the Church, if the Church believes that the person has truly repented of having committed adultery.

For the **spirit of the law**:

We ourselves have to make the decisions. For the spirit of the law the Church cannot make the decisions, because nobody has actually committed adultery. No act of adultery has taken place. Rather, people have allowed themselves to think the wrong thoughts. As Jesus Christ said:

But I say unto you, That **whosoever looks on a woman to lust after her** has committed adultery with her already in his heart. (Matthew 5:28)

In this situation we have transgressed the spirit of the law. But this transgression is not known to anyone else. It occurred only in our minds. No physical act of adultery actually took place. And we ourselves are the only people who know about the lustful thoughts that we entertained.

The distinction between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law that most members of God's Church understand fairly well is this: to transgress the letter of the law, a sin must actually take place (in our example: the physical act of adultery). But transgressing according to the spirit of the law does not require a sinful act to take place. We can transgress the spirit of the law by the way we use our minds, without actually turning our wrong thoughts into physical actions.

The distinction to which most members of God's Church have never given much thought is: for the spirit of the law the Church does not make the decisions. For transgressions according to the spirit of the law we ourselves make the decisions.

By "we ourselves make the decisions" I do not mean that we disfellowship ourselves when we have transgressed the spirit of the law. Certainly not! No, what I mean here is that **it is up to us to recognize that with our thoughts we are transgressing God's laws**. The Church cannot recognize such transgressions. Only we ourselves can decide: I am sinning in thinking these thoughts; I need to stop these thoughts and think about something else. And I need to confess my sins to God and repent and ask God for forgiveness.

Most of the time most of us don't actually make "the decision" to approach God for forgiveness when we have entertained sinful thoughts, do we? No, in most cases we may briefly feel a little guilty, but **we just move on** and act as if those sinful thoughts had never been entertained in our minds. The problem with "just moving on" is that those sinful thoughts were never really rooted out, and they are likely to come back to us at some point in the future.

Consider what David said:

I acknowledged my sin unto You, and my iniquity have I not hid. I said, **I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD**; and You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah. (Psalms 32:5)

That is also what we must do ... confess our sins to God. But the question is: **what sins** do we confess to God? If we are not killing, stealing, lying, committing adultery, etc., what sins are we confessing?

Do we ever confess any sins that are “only” transgressions of the spirit of the law, sins where we haven’t actually done something sinful? When we are on our knees praying to God, do such sins at least sometimes come to mind, so that we can confess them to God? Or do sins like that never cross our minds when we are praying?

In this regard it is helpful if we pray like David.

Who can understand *his* errors? **cleanse You me from secret *faults***. (Psalm 19:12)

If we are sincerely searching, then God will answer this prayer.

ANOTHER DIFFERENCE

Another significant difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law concerns the parameters within which the laws of God are applicable.

For the **letter of the law**:

The **precise wording** of the law is the most important thing. The intention is **to restrict the applicability of the law** to very narrow and precisely defined parameters. It is assumed that anything that is not explicitly stated in the law is therefore not covered by that law. The real intention underlying the law is **deliberately ignored**. This is how we want human judges to judge us when we are in trouble ... to restrict their judgment to the letter of the law.

For the **spirit of the law**:

The **intention underlying the law** is more important than the actual wording. The actual wording is certainly important, but it is not viewed as a limiting factor. The spirit of the law allows the principle underlying the law to also be applied to other circumstances, which are not specifically spelled out in the law.

For example, the letter of the law says “you shall not kill” (Matthew 5:21). The letter of the law does not cover feelings of anger and hatred. But the spirit of the law means that if we are “angry with our brother without a cause”, then we are in danger of the same judgment as someone who kills another person (see verse 22).

Jesus Christ was pointing out that the law “you shall not kill” also covers feelings of anger, resentment

and hatred towards other people. It covers much more than just the letter of the law.

Human nature does not like the spirit of the law when it is applied to our own actions and conduct. In those situations we want any judgment or evaluation to be restricted to the letter of the law.

The spirit of the law greatly expands the parameters of every law of God. And the **two ways in which the spirit of the law applies to us** are:

1) When **we have not actually done anything** that breaks the law. We have only thought in detail about actions that break God's laws.

2) When **we have done something** that does not directly go against the actual wording of a specific law. But our action is covered by the principle that underlies one of God's laws, and therefore what we have done goes against something that God intended to also be covered by the way God worded a specific law or principle. Here the parameters for the law's applicability are much wider than the actual specific wording of the law.

Now let's consider some Scriptures.

JESUS CHRIST PRESENTED THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

Isaiah 42:21 is speaking about Jesus Christ when it says:

The LORD is well pleased for His righteousness' sake; **He will magnify the law, and make *it* honorable**. (Isaiah 42:21)

The Hebrew verb here translated as "He will magnify" ("gadal") refers to "making greater in size and/or in importance". In as far as Jesus Christ greatly expanded the areas of applicability of God's laws, He did make God's laws "**greater in size**". But Christ also made God's laws "**greater in importance**". So the way Jesus Christ expounded Old Testament laws in Matthew 5-7 **increased the importance** of all of those laws. And that is exactly what the spirit of the law does ... it raises the level of importance for all of God's laws.

The spirit of the law is **more important** than the letter of the law!

The Hebrew verb here translated as "make it honorable" ("adar") refers to "something that is **superior to something else**, something that is majestic". So Jesus Christ made God's laws "superior" to the way they had been in Old Testament times.

The spirit of the law is **superior** to the letter of the law.

Jesus Christ fulfilled this prophecy in Matthew 5.

Think not that **I am come** to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but **to fulfill**. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, **till all be fulfilled**. (Matthew 5:17-18)

The Greek word translated as "(I am come) to fulfill" ("plerosai") literally means "to fill to the full, to abound". In other words, **during Old Testament times the laws of God were not given fully or completely**. There was still an element that was missing from God's laws. And Jesus Christ came to provide that missing element, to give us God's laws in their complete intention. That is how Jesus Christ "magnified" the law, by greatly expanding the parameters of applicability.

The expression "**till all be fulfilled**" ("heos an panta genetai") tells us that there will be a time in the future when some things will indeed "pass away" from the law. That will be the time when all of God's plan has been completed. That will be when God the Father creates the new heaven and the new earth. At that point many things that are a part of God's law today will no longer have any meaning (e.g. tithing, Sabbath-keeping, etc.). And so those things will then pass away. But that is still more than 1100 years from now. Till then all of God's laws will stand.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

Matthew chapter 5, right after Jesus Christ resisted Satan's temptations at the start of His ministry, presents various examples of the spirit of the law. We've already seen Matthew 5:21-22, and also verse 28. Let's look at some additional examples.

Again, you have heard that it has been said by them of old time, you shall not forswear yourself, but shall perform unto the Lord your oaths: **But I say unto you**, **Swear not at all**; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is His footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these comes from the evil one. (Matthew 5:33-37)

The spirit of God's law is that we never resort to swearing in any circumstances. The reason for this is that any oath is going to involve some things that are completely out of our control. All God requires of us in this regard is that we say what we mean and mean what we say, and that we are extremely cautious about making any commitments that will involve factors beyond our control.

You have heard that it has been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: **But I say unto you, That you resist not evil**: but whosoever shall smite you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Matthew 5:38-39)

This is one more amplification of a law from the Old Testament. The underlying thought here is that God

will be the One who will deal with those who deal with us in an evil way.

I might point out that in the expression “that you resist not evil” the Greek word for “not” (“me”) expresses only a qualified negation. That is, this applies only to certain situations. The Greek word for an absolute negation is not used here.

This instruction is not intended to be applied to all situations. As just one example, when the two witnesses respond to “evil” being directed at them with “fire proceeding out of their mouth” (Revelation 11:5), and in that way killing those who treated them in an “evil” way, then they will obviously not be “turning the other cheek”. So Matthew 5:38-39 is not intended to apply to that type of situation. And when God’s people are told to “flee” from persecution (see Matthew 10:23), then that is also not “turning the other cheek”; they are fleeing.

You have heard that it has been said, you shall love thy neighbor, and hate your enemy. **But I say unto you**, **Love your enemies**, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; (Matthew 5:43-44)

This is one more example of Jesus Christ explaining the spirit of the law.

Right, so much for some examples. Here is the thing we need to understand.

Jesus Christ only gave us **some** examples for certain Old Testament laws. But Christ did not spell out the spirit of the law for every single Old Testament law. **Christ left that for us to do**!

Let me repeat that:

God requires us to figure out for ourselves the spirit of the law for every other law of God, on which Jesus Christ did not directly elaborate.

In other words, having explained the process for half a dozen different Old Testament laws, **we then need to recognize the pattern**. And having recognized it, we need to then apply the pattern to all the other laws from the Old Testament, which still apply to us today.

For me that process is a part of my responsibility as a minister of God. It is an obligation that is laid upon me. But let’s be honest here.

Most of you are not going to be very keen to figure out for yourself the spirit of the law for those laws, where Jesus Christ Himself didn’t spell out the spirit of the law, are you?

That sounds too much like hard work. That sounds too much like **having to be stricter on ourselves**

than is actually spelled out for us in the letter of the law. It sounds too much like us also having to seriously try to understand **God's real intentions** for all the laws that Jesus Christ Himself did not specifically amplify for us. That's something the minister should do for us, right?

No, wrong! God requires us as individuals to understand the spirit of the law for every situation that may arise for us. Okay, so you are now determined to try your best for figuring out the spirit of the law for everything, right?

Good!

So go ahead and **figure out for yourself how the spirit of the law applies to things like**: smoking, make-up, hair coloring, what we eat and drink, what medical services we make use of, what activities we engage in, how we spend our leisure time, how we look after our health, how we fulfill our responsibilities at work, voting in national elections, how we handle personal commitments and obligations, how we deal with things we have borrowed, dating, how we keep the Sabbath, how we deal with our neighbors, how we deal with our spouses, our children and our parents, the things for which we show approval, the things we support; in short, every single activity in our lives. **Are you ready to figure out for yourself the spirit of the law for all of these things?** Or do you just want the Church to give you all the answers? Or do the laws of God never even cross your mind for many of the things in the above list?

In all these things don't expect someone else to tell you what you should do. No, you need to go ahead and figure out for yourself the spirit of the law in each situation. **That's what God expects you to do**! That's the Christian life.

Why should the minister have to figure out all those things for you? And **if you can't figure out** for yourself the spirit of the law in all of these things, then **how can you possibly change** your ways to be more fully in line with the spirit of the law? Making changes in how we handle some of the things in the above list, because someone else tells us to make such changes, is not the same as making changes because of our own personal convictions.

People in God's Church who don't make any effort to figure out for themselves **how** the spirit of the law applies to any and all aspects of their lives **lack personal convictions**! Doing what your minister tells you to do comes a very, very distant second to you figuring out for yourself how the spirit of God's law applies to all parts of your personal life. Why is this so? This is so because when you do what someone else tells you to do, then that does not tell God anything about your character, and specifically, it doesn't tell God how your mind functions and reasons.

Godly character is not developed by keeping the letter of the law. Did you know that? **The most powerful tool** for developing godly character in our own lives **is for us to implement the spirit of the law** in our very own personal circumstances. And many of us make no effort to do that, right?

So when you figure out for yourself how the spirit of God's law applies to some specific activities or circumstances **in your life**, then that tells God how your mind works. As I mentioned at the start, for the spirit of the law we ourselves have to make the decisions. **We have to judge ourselves**.

As the Apostle Paul explained:

For **if we would judge ourselves**, we should not be judged. (1 Corinthians 11:31)

The obvious intent here is that we judge ourselves **according to the spirit of the law**, not only according to the letter of the law.

In this connection we should also consider what Jesus Christ said in Luke 17:10.

So likewise you, when you shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, **We are unprofitable servants**: we have done (only) that which was our duty to do. (Luke 17:10)

Instead of reading “those things which are commanded you”, try reading this verse with the expression “those things which are spelled out for you”. **We have only done those things that are spelled out for us**. But those things which require us to use our own minds, and which require us to understand the way God thinks, and the principles God expects us to apply, **to those things we have never given a thought**. No, for those things we just ask the minister. I mean, that’s what we pay them for, right? They are supposed to tell us how we are to apply the spirit of the law in our daily lives, right? That’s almost like saying: they are supposed to build godly character for us, right? But you know that this last statement is not possible, right?

Understand that if this statement “that’s what the minister is supposed to do” really still applies to any of us, then we are indeed nothing more than unprofitable servants to God. It is not enough to expect the minister to tell us everything God expects us to do. What the minister tells us to do is not an expression of our own personal convictions, because we didn’t use our own minds in the process of establishing what to do.

If we don’t use our own minds to determine how to put the spirit of God’s laws into practice in our own lives, then we are not on particularly solid ground. More than anything else, God wants to know **how** we use our own minds. Simply doing whatever someone else has told us to do, does not tell God anything about how our free minds actually operate. And doing what someone else tells us to do is not a particularly good tool for developing godly character.

It is not obedience to the letter of the law that develops godly character. That’s what Jesus Christ has told us in Luke 17:10. It is first establishing, and then applying the spirit of the law, that develops godly character within us. And that process we must apply to **all** of God’s laws.

There are many unrepentant people in the world who focus on one or more specific commandments (e.g. the Sabbath or dietary laws, etc.), and for those commandments they are strict about the letter of the law. But if such people don’t seek to understand **the spirit of the law**, then their strict observance of the letter of the law doesn’t achieve very much, from a character-development point of view. People in the world may only look at the letter of the law. God’s people, on the other hand, are required to focus

on the spirit of the law. That's what Jesus Christ was explaining in Matthew chapters 5-7.

Now one more area that involves the spirit of the law is the matter of **hypocrisy**. Hypocrisy is one specific form of lying, usually a rather devious one. So **how does the spirit of the law apply here**? It applies every time when we don't want people to know what we are doing, or what we have done, or what we have said. In many families this form of hypocrisy is a daily occurrence.

Every time **we don't want our wife or husband or parents or child to know what we are doing**, we are breaking the spirit of the law that says "you shall not lie". When we pretend that we are doing or have done **something else**, rather than the truth, we are breaking the spirit of the law. **We don't want someone else to know** what we are doing or have done, and so when we are caught in the act, **we pretend** that we are doing something else. That is a clear transgression of the spirit of the law. There is no virtue in being "the great pretender"; there is only vice (i.e. in the context of family and close friends who trust us; I'm not talking about misleading people who seek to harm us or even destroy us, like David misleading the king of Gath, 1Samuel 21:13). And we forget what Jesus Christ said:

For **there is nothing hidden, which shall not be manifested**; neither was any thing kept secret, but that it should come abroad. (Mark 4:22)

Sooner or later the truth always comes out, and then hypocrisy will be exposed. The hypocrisy is that we didn't actually tell a lie to our parents or children or wife or husband; we just tried **without saying anything** to create a false impression. As far as the spirit of the law is concerned, that's a really **clever way of lying** without having to say a single word. And when we then later get on our knees to pray to God, our hypocrisy from that earlier situation won't even cross our minds, right? After all, we didn't actually say anything misleading; **we just implied it** with our feigned actions.

This too is covered by the spirit of the law.

Now when we seriously try to figure out the spirit of the law for personal situations that we have to deal with, then something of a battle develops in our minds. The Apostle Paul described that battle to the church members in Rome.

THE BATTLE IN OUR MINDS

Let's start with Romans 7:14.

For we know that **the law is spiritual**: but **I am physical** (Greek "sarkikos"), sold under sin. (Romans 7:14)

"The law is spiritual" means, amongst other things, that the law of God is only understood correctly by the spirit of God. So we have to have the spirit of God in order to correctly understand God's intended meaning and application of the law of God. It takes the holy spirit to understand things that are spiritual

(1 Corinthians 2:11).

In Romans 7:14 Paul presents the two forces involved in the battle in his mind. The holy spirit in Paul's mind enabled Paul to understand how the spirit of the law applied to his circumstances. But human nature, common to all physical, mortal human beings, made it very difficult at times for Paul to control the thoughts in his mind.

What we need to understand about the discussion that follows is that **Paul was speaking about controlling his mind**. He was speaking about the spirit of the law. Paul was not wrestling with sinful activities like killing, stealing, committing adultery, breaking the Sabbath, worshiping idols, etc. Paul was not wrestling with any sins covered by the letter of the law.

Paul was wrestling with sins identified by the spirit of the law. He was wrestling with entertaining wrong thoughts of lusting and coveting, etc. And so what he describes in the next few verses involved mental battles: resisting thoughts that his conscience told him were not right before God, the battle between the spirit of God and human nature.

In the next verse Paul explained what was going on in his mind.

For **that which I do I allow not**: for what I would, that do I not; but **what I hate, that do I**. (Romans 7:15)

Here Paul is not actually speaking about "doing things", though that certainly also applies to the principle he is here discussing. But his statement needs to be seen in perspective. Paul wrote this letter to the Romans around 56 A.D. About 4 or so years later Paul was a prisoner in Rome, and he wrote the letter to the Philippians around 61 A.D. So about 4 or 5 years after writing Romans, Paul said the following:

Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; **concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless**. (Philippians 3:6)

That's a pretty bold statement, one which I myself would most assuredly not be willing to make about myself. But Paul knew exactly what he was saying. He said that as far as the letter of the law was concerned, he was "blameless". The Greek adjective "amemptos" used here refers to "**no fault can be found**". And this statement certainly also covers the time of his life 4 or 5 years earlier, when he had written Romans.

In Romans 7 Paul was describing the battle that took place in his mind between the pulls of human nature to lust and covet, and his conscience which had been shaped by God's holy spirit within him.

With the expression "what I do" Paul was not thinking of any specific "things" he had actually done. He simply used the words "what I do" in a very general way to enable him to express this mental battle in his mind. And while for Paul that battle did not involve breaking the letter of the law (he was "blameless"

in that regard), it did involve breaking the spirit of the law (i.e. entertaining wrong thoughts), and for this application of the law Paul acknowledged guilt.

So as we look at these verses in Romans 7 let's keep in mind that Paul is speaking about **the mental battle** to always control his mind, and not about any lawless conduct or actions that would have transgressed the letter of the law.

Having presented the statement in verse 15, Paul then reasons from that statement.

If then I do that which I would not, **I consent unto the law that *it is* good**. (Romans 7:16)

The word "if" introduces **a theoretical situation**. Paul is saying: if I do the things my conscience tells me not to do, then that automatically implies that the law must be good, because my own conscience tells me not to do anything that breaks God's laws.

He then continues reasoning from this theoretical situation.

Now **then** it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me. (Romans 7:17)

Paul is saying that in this situation his own mind is not consenting to what he ends up doing. He is describing the mental battle. Rather than relating any personal experiences, Paul is describing **a common mental process**, which all converted people face on a fairly regular basis. The process is one of **dealing with selfish thoughts**, wants and desires that seem to spontaneously appear in our minds at various times.

His statement "sin that dwells in me" is a reference to human nature. And so in the next verse Paul presents human nature.

For I know that **in me** (that is, in my flesh,) **dwells no good thing**: for to will is present with me; but *how* to perform that which is good I find not. (Romans 7:18)

What "dwelled" within Paul was human nature. The nature that dwelled within Paul was not good; it was evil. Human nature is inherently evil. And in this verse Paul explains why it is evil. Human nature wants to be accepted as good, but without actually doing good. And this is a very selfish way of thinking.

Paul continued to reason from the theoretical example he had introduced in verse 16.

For the good that I would, I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. (Romans 7:19)

He is describing the warfare in his mind between human nature and his conscience which has been

educated by God's spirit. And he is acknowledging that in this battle he at times ends up breaking the spiritual intent of God's laws.

From all the reasoning Paul has presented, he then draws a conclusion.

Now if I do that I would not, **it is no more I that do it**, but sin that dwells in me. (Romans 7:20)

With the expression "it is no more I that do it" Paul is not pretending that he "didn't do it" (i.e. entertain wrong selfish thoughts), because in the first part of this sentence he states that he "did do it". What Paul means is that mentally he did not want to entertain selfish thoughts, etc., but that he was weak, in the same way that you and I are weak. As he says in verse 22:

For **I delight in the law of God** after the inward man: (Romans 7:22)

With his mind Paul was in absolute agreement with God's laws, and he desired to live his life in full agreement with those laws. And as far as his conduct was concerned, he was "blameless" in the law. But then there was a pull in the opposite direction.

But I see **another law** in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to **the law of sin** which is in my members. (Romans 7:23)

Let's first look at the word "law" in this verse. The Greek word "nomos" which is used here has a somewhat wider meaning than our English word "law". While we tend to think of "a law" as a binding instruction that is given by lawgivers, our word "law" originally referred to "**a binding custom or practice** of a community". It may not have been given by any lawgivers in a codified form, but it was commonly accepted by all. This also applies to the Greek word translated as "law".

Now in this verse Paul refers to two laws. With "the law of my mind" Paul is referring to the law of God. And with "the law of sin", also called "another law" Paul is referring to human nature.

Now this "law of sin" (human nature) was not established by any lawgiver. Specifically, this "law of sin" was not established by God! Rather, human nature is "the law of sin" by virtue of the fact that **it is common to all human beings**. As explained in my article "Is Human Nature Good Or Evil?", human nature is a way of thinking and reasoning that is developed in every one of us in the first few months or years after birth, and it is certainly well-established by age two years.

This "law of sin" is indeed "binding" on us, because we all have human nature. Now, as I just said, this law of sin was **not "established" by God**. But it was **"recognized" and identified by God** exactly 120 years before the flood, when God defined this "law of sin". The definition God provided for human nature is:

And GOD saw (i.e. recognized) that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* **every**

imagination of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually. (Genesis 6:5)

In plain language, the definition for “the law of sin” is: every imagination of the thoughts of man’s heart is only evil continually! That’s it. That applies to you and to me and to the Apostle Paul and to every other human being.

The converted mind will recognize this pull upon itself. The converted mind will fight against this pull. But we are not able to completely root it out of our lives as long as we are still mortal human beings. At best we can keep it under control. That’s what Paul mentioned in another letter.

But **I keep under my body, and bring *it* into subjection**: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway. (1 Corinthians 9:27)

By keeping his body “under” Paul meant that he kept his human nature under control, the selfish nature he referred to as “the law of sin” in Romans.

Let’s continue with Paul’s next statement to the Romans.

O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? (Romans 7:24)

This is the feeling which the spirit of the law produces in a converted mind, a feeling of weakness and helplessness, as far as our own powers and abilities are concerned.

When it came to the letter of the law, then Paul was okay; he was “blameless”. He worked diligently to keep the selfish pulls of his body “in subjection”. And by the letter of the law other people could not fault Paul.

But when it came to the spirit of the law, then Paul could very vividly recognize his own faults and weaknesses and failings. And he could also recognize that in this life he would never be able to totally eliminate from his life the mind which is “only evil continually”. All he could do was to always be on guard against selfish motivations taking over his thought processes.

Paul then concluded:

I thank God (***that***) through Jesus Christ our Lord (***I will be delivered***). So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh (***I am still subject to***) the law of sin. (Romans 7:25, amplified for clarity)

The translators misunderstood this verse. I have added a few words in bold italics to indicate that they are not a part of the actual Greek text. But they help to clarify the meaning Paul is trying to convey. Notice that the last part of this verse (“with the flesh the law of sin”) does not contain a verb. This means

that **a verb is implied**. But “serving” is not the verb that is implied.

Regarding the law of sin, the difference between “serving” and “being subject to” is this: “Serving” implies willingly obeying the law of sin. “Being subject to” does not imply such willing obedience. Rather, “being subject to” implies that we are motivated to resist the law of sin. And then we are prepared to deal with whatever the consequences of resisting might be.

So it is better to say that we are still “subject to” the law of sin, because our human nature remains with us as long as we are mortal. And being “subject to human nature” means that at times we are still likely to fall. But it will **not** be “willing obedience” to the law of sin.

One other point:

We don’t thank God the Father “through” Jesus Christ. No, Jesus Christ instructed us to directly approach the Father in prayer and to thank Him directly. And for any requests that we address to God the Father, we are to do so “in the name of Jesus Christ”. However, **thanking God does not involve any requests**. But thanking God does raise the question “thank God **for what**?”. This statement is really the answer to the question in the previous verse. So we have:

ion: Who will deliver me from the body of this death?

er: Jesus Christ will deliver us from the body of this death. That is through the sacrifice He brought on our behalf. And for that deliverance we thank God the Father.

So let’s summarize what we have covered regarding the spirit of the law.

IN SUMMARY

1) One major difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law is this:

For the letter of the law: When we transgress it, then that is easily known to other people. It involves actions or activities on our part. This is something the leadership in the Church may find out about. Therefore when certain transgressions of the letter of the law are involved, then the Church is in a position to make the decisions regarding disfellowshipping or not, or reinstating a church member, etc.

For the spirit of the law: The Church cannot make any decisions, because our transgressions of the spirit of the law are typically not known to anyone else. When we transgress the spirit of the law, we ourselves have to identify those transgressions and then confess them to God. If we ourselves don’t identify that we have transgressed the spirit of the law, then nobody else will identify such transgressions on our part either. **Nobody else can help us** to eliminate this type of transgression from our lives. We ourselves carry full responsibility before God for identifying, and then dealing with our transgressions of the spirit of the law. That is precisely what Paul was doing in Romans ... identifying and dealing with his

own transgressions of the spirit of the law.

2) In practice, most of the time most of us don't give such transgressions even the slightest thought when we appear before God on our knees in prayer. Transgressions of the spirit of the law don't make much of an impression on us, because we haven't actually done anything wrong. We just sinned in the way we used our minds.

3) One other very significant difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law is this:

Mostly we like to focus on the letter of the law, because that gives us precise limitations for how a law is to be applied. **We don't have to use our own minds** to make decisions for things that are not specifically covered by the letter of the law. So the exact way a law is worded becomes the most important criterion in applying that law.

The spirit of the law does not focus on the specific wording of the law. For the spirit of the law **the actual intention** underlying that law is the most important thing. The wording of the law takes on a secondary importance. Now it doesn't work for someone else to establish that intention for us. **We ourselves have to put out the effort** to establish God's underlying intention for every one of God's laws.

That is the only way our understanding of God's mind will grow!

You see, the intentions underlying every law of God reveal God's mind and God's thinking, and what is really important to God. We cannot possibly understand the mind of God if we don't understand God's real intentions for every law, going well beyond the actual wording of the laws. The intentions never work against the actual wording. But they greatly increase the circumstances and situations in which certain specific laws are applicable, when compared to the letter of the law.

The truth is that very few people in any of the Church of God organizations are actually prepared to do this for themselves. But doing this (seeking to understand **God's intentions** for every law and instruction) is what is meant by "study to show yourself approved to God" (see 2 Timothy 2:15). Reading a couple or three chapters in the Bible now and then is not what 2 Timothy 2:15 is talking about. Reading without thinking has no value.

It is only when we seek to understand God's intentions for every law that we come to a deeper understanding of the mind of God. But this takes serious effort. And most of us are not prepared to personally put in that much effort; we expect the ministers to do that kind of work for us, right?

Okay, go ahead and **prove me wrong**! I'll be glad if you do! But never forget that human nature hates the spirit of the law.

4) In Old Testament times **God's law was not really complete**. So Christ came to complete the giving of God's law. He did that by explaining the spirit of the law. And in Matthew 5-7 Jesus Christ used half a

dozen examples to illustrate **how** the spirit of the law is to be applied. But this was not meant to be an exhaustive list. For all the other laws of God that are not specifically addressed in Matthew 5-7, we ourselves are expected to figure out “the spirit of the law”.

In Matthew 5-7 Christ was showing us how we must go about **establishing for ourselves the spirit of the law** for every other law of God. Christ is not going to spoonfeed us, by doing everything for us. How we determine for ourselves God’s actual intentions for every other law, that Jesus Christ did not specifically address, will tell God **how earnestly we desire to change**, to comply more fully with God’s wishes.

That is how we are to put 1 John 3:22 into practice in our lives.

And whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments, and **do those things that are pleasing in His sight**. (1 John 3:22)

The thing that is pleasing to God, above obedience to God’s commandments, is if we seek to understand the way God thinks, so that we may freely accept the same way of thinking. But without earnestly seeking to understand the spirit of the law it becomes extremely difficult to “do those things that are pleasing to God”.

In Jeremiah 9 God said:

But let him that glories glory in this, **that he understands and knows Me**, that I *am* the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for **in these *things* I delight**, says the LORD. (Jeremiah 9:24)

Yes, you read your Bible regularly, or even just now and then. And you try to obey all of God’s laws. But how much effort have you put out **to get to know God**, to get to understand how God thinks and reasons? If you are not trying to understand for yourself the spirit of all of God’s laws, then the answer has to be “very little”.

All obedience to God has to be based on understanding. And the more we understand God, and how God thinks and reasons, and what God is determined to accomplish, the more meaningful our obedience is going to be. How and why does God exercise “lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness”? Answers to these questions will require a lot of thinking things through on our part.

We put out a lot of effort to make money, to pay for all our needs. But **how about putting out effort to understand God**, and to understand what the laws of God are designed to achieve? Or is that something only the minister is supposed to do?

5) We also need to recognize that when we in earnest seek to apply the spirit of the law to our own actions and conduct, that then a struggle is likely to develop in our minds. That struggle will be between our own human nature’s pull towards selfishness, and our conscience that is seeking to understand all

of God’s laws more fully. Paul described that struggle in his own mind. When we focus on the actual intent of God’s laws, on the spirit of the law, then it is inevitable that we will recognize serious shortcomings in our daily lives. And then the struggle starts ... or perhaps intensifies.

6) If we in earnest seek to understand the spirit of the law, if we earnestly seek to understand the mind of God, **then God will surely help us and guide us**. But it will take effort on our part, serious effort.

So you go ahead and figure out for yourself the spirit of the law for everything that affects your life.

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