

“Not of the Letter but of the Spirit”

One could get the impression that certain passages of Scripture must have been written to confuse and mislead the unwary. Of course, the actual problem is not with the Scriptures but the failure of some people to pay attention to the immediate context of a given passage and to other Bible passages bearing on the same point.

An example of this is seen in the statement of the title. It is common to hear these words from Paul quoted to mean that careful observance of the details of God’s law is not vital as long as one simply attempts to act in keeping with the spirit of his ward, i.e., “Don’t sweat the details of God’s word, just act generally as you think God intended.”

A cursory look at other passages should tell anyone who is interested in what the Lord requires that something is wrong with this application of Paul’s statement. For example, Jesus instructed his apostles to teach those they baptized to, “...Observe all things that I have commanded you...” (Matthew 28:20). This is not to say that any of us has it all perfected, but it does say that none of us is excused by the Lord from at least putting forth our best effort to learn it and then do it.

How about the context of Paul’s statement found at II Corinthians 3:5-6? It reads, “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit: for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” The key to this passage is the term “new covenant.” It implies a difference between it as “new” and another covenant which had become old. This old covenant, the letter that kills; “the ministry of death,” is described as that which was “engraved on stones” and given through Moses.

Not that the Law of Moses was faulty. It was, “...holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12). But it did exactly what law is designed to do: it defined what was right and condemned transgression of it. The problem, then, was not with the law but with those who broke it and, in a larger sense of God’s law, all mankind (Romans 3:23). In this sense, the letter of the law killed. Therefore, a “new covenant” was necessary, one providing gracious forgiveness and life—the gospel of Christ revealed by the Spirit through Christ’s apostles. There is no casualness toward the gospel here. Rather, it requires obedience to its covenant terms for life in Christ.

-Jerry F. Bassett