

**Altavista Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Letter or Spirit?”**  
**Psalm 139:1-6**  
**II Corinthians 3:1-6**

**Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**June 17, 2018**

**Psalm 139:1-6**

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.

**II Corinthians 3:1-6**

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

**“Letter or Spirit?”**

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This is a rhetorical question, so you don't have to answer. How many of you enjoy following rules? Some of you may love rules. You love the structure and clarity that rules provide. There's no ambiguity when it comes to what should and shouldn't be done. You folks who love rules probably enjoy playing board games with detailed and complex rules. Those of you who do not love rules were probably the folks who fed your veggies to the dog under the table. As long as the food got eaten, who cares, right? I think we can all agree that rules are a necessity for social relationships. I think we all agree that the rules “do not murder other people” and “do not steal things” are good ones. Equally as good are the simple rules like “don't touch a hot eye on the stove” or “don't talk politics around Aunt Ellen.” The former two keep us from wanton death and destruction, the latter two keep us healthy and peaceful.

All of this and more came flooding into my mind as I studied our passage for this morning. What drew special attention from me was verse six: God “has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” When I read that verse I got to thinking about a very common argument in twenty-first century America. One of the many things that divides us as a nation is our interpretation of our national rules. By way of introduction I joked about board game rules and household rules. While we are

quick to chuckle at those, we very often tense up and get defensive when we start talking about our national laws.

There are two schools of thought when interpreting both household rules and national laws. There are those who support an adherence to the letter of the law and those who support an adherence to the spirit of the law. What does it mean, letter or spirit? By way of example, let's use the Third Amendment to the Constitution. Does anyone know what is the third amendment? "No Soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law." The letter of the law adherent reads that no soldier may take up nonconsensual residence in a person's home, but that does not mean other agents of the state can't. An FBI agent is not a soldier, neither is a sheriff; but military police is getting into a grey area. For the one who has a strict reading of the letter of the law, there is nothing in the Constitution barring non-military entities from quartering in civilian homes. The spirit of the law adherent, on the other hand, reads that if no soldier is allowed nonconsensual residence, then that *implies* a certain level of privacy for homeowners. To a certain point the government has no rights within an individual's house. While that is not explicitly clear in the Third Amendment, that very interpretation of the spirit of the law was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1965.

You can see how these nuanced interpretations can cause so much strife and confusion both at the dinner table and in the courts. Now, government is not the only institution plagued by these. Both of these schools of thought exist in the church and have existed for a very long time. When speaking theologically, however, they go by other names. To follow the letter of the law over and against the spirit is called legalism. To follow the spirit of the law over and against the letter is called antinomianism. And I'd like to discuss both of them today.

Legalism exalts law above grace. The church in which I grew up was very legalistic. We had to adhere to strict rules regarding dress, speech, and conduct both within the church and without. Men's trousers had to be long. Women could only wear skirts or dresses. If you walked around during the sermon you had to point your finger in the air. Worldly music and associations were right out. And don't get me started on the prohibition on dancing. The fundamental distortion of legalism is the belief that one can earn one's way into the kingdom of heaven. Or put another way, a person must guard himself or herself from any and all temptations that would cause him or her to lose salvation. That was my upbringing. Adherence to the letter of the law to the exclusion of the spirit of the law. I'd say that was the biggest influence on why I am a Calvinist today.

The legalist is doing three things. First, he is reducing the law to its most narrow and wooden interpretation. "If you do this, this, and this, you will be saved. Abstain from that, that, and that, you will be secure." Without a proper understanding of the spirit of the law, Christian faith and life is cheapened to a list of do's and don'ts. Second, the legalist often adds her own laws to the law of God. One of the most frustrating examples of this is with alcohol. The Bible is clear that drunkenness and debauchery are sinful. The law of God does say to refrain from such insobriety. But the legalist takes it one step further to say that *any* consumption of alcohol is a sin. Now, the one that tipped me over the edge into Calvinism was the claim that the Latin dances—samba,

merengue, salsa, etc.,—were originally brought over from Africa and are therefore active forms of pagan worship. How ridiculous and unscriptural. Legalists often tend to make rules more strict than God himself does. When this occurs, legalism introduces a tyranny over the people of God. And last, the legalist oftentimes majors on the minors. Legalism has a tendency to over-exalt personal virtues while downplaying personal vices as insignificant. For example, I may refrain from dancing and see that as a great spiritual strength, while at the same time passing off an adulterous relationship as a minor matter. The opposite is also true: the legalist often zeros in on another's sins while ignoring or excusing his own vices.

Antinomianism, on the other hand, goes in the opposition direction. The word literally means “anti-law.” The antinomian, likewise, does three things. First, she denies or downplays the significance of God’s law in the life of the believer. She argues that there is no longer any obligation to keep the moral law of God because Jesus frees us from it. This is the same heresy that Paul had to quell, so it’s not new to Christian history. People saw the liberty that Christ offers by becoming the law and they concluded that this new-found liberty extends even to a freedom *from* obedience. Biblically speaking, this is not the case. Second, the antinomian wrongfully assumes that the Old Testament was a covenant of law and the New Testament a covenant of grace. He sees the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy and thinks, “Thanks be to God that Jesus abolished the Law!” On the contrary, the Old Testament is a monumental testimony to God’s amazing grace toward his people. Likewise, the New Testament is full of commandments that the Christian is obligated to follow. What was it that Jesus said to his disciples on Maundy Thursday? “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” And last, by denying the law, the antinomian denies God’s sovereign power over human life. The antinomian does not like the language or the thought of humans placing their whole allegiance and reliance on God. Antinomianism is bedfellows with pride. “I’m in charge of my own destiny and I’m the ultimate authority on the way I live my life.” “Me, my, mine,” that is the mantra of the antinomian.

The Christian needs to be careful about both of these schools of thought. For both are often cited to be in Paul. II Corinthians 3:6, “God made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” This passage is often used to support antinomianism. Romans 3:31, “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.” This passage is often used to support legalism. Where both camps get it wrong is in another theological confusion. Legalism and antinomianism both confuse justification with sanctification. Justification is a legal term and describes our relationship with God the Father. The Christian is justified, meaning she is legally counted as righteous before God solely on the basis of God’s grace and the work of the Jesus Christ. As Paul says elsewhere, we are justified by faith alone, apart from works of the law. Following the law does not save us. This is what Paul is talking about in our passage this morning. Adherence to the letter of the law does not give us eternal life, that comes only through the Spirit. In the same manner, all believers, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, must work toward their own sanctification. The Apostle James is quick to remind us, “Faith without works is dead.” Sanctification is something the Holy Spirit starts in us and we respond to it. We grow in faith by keeping God’s holy commands. We cannot ignore them, like the antinomians, nor are we to add to them like the legalists. For obedience to God’s commandments does not gain us God’s favor,

but rather displays our loving gratitude for the grace already bestowed through the work of Christ.

Christianity is far more than a mere list of rules. It is, at its center, a personal relationship with Christ himself. *Yet*, Christianity is also *not less* than rules. The New Testament clearly includes some do's and don'ts. Christianity is not a religion that sanctions the idea that everyone has the right to do what is right in his own eyes. On the contrary, Christianity never gives anyone the "right" to do what is wrong. We are still responsible for our actions and will be held accountable before God. The Rev. Anthony Carter puts it this way. "No one can truly call himself a disciple of Jesus who is not willing to obey him. The disciple, the one who truly listens and learns, will put into practice what he learns. For the disciple, obedience is not optional...When the wedding at Cana ran out of wine, Mary told the servants of the house to find Jesus and 'do whatever he tells you.' (John 2:5), That was great advice."<sup>1</sup> The only antidote to either legalism or antinomianism is a serious study of the Word of God. Only then will we be properly instructed in what is pleasing and displeasing to God. And only by the Word will we be empowered to live such lives.

Let us pray. Sovereign God, you created all things and therefore are Ruler of all things. Help us to see your mighty and awesome power, that we may never forget who is Lord of all. As our Sovereign, you do have commands for us. You tell us to study your Word, pray in your name, and live according to your design. You tell us how to order our lives. To seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly in your name. You define what is a lifestyle pleasing to you. May we have the courage and the wisdom to live accordingly. Not ignoring your laws nor adding to them. But simply obeying Christ as his true disciples. In his name we pray. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Anthony J. Carter, "What is a Disciple?" in *Tabletalk Magazine*. Vol. 42, No. 6, June 2018. Page 9