Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Two Ministries**

**2 Corinthians 3:4-11**

12th Sunday After Trinity

08.22.2021

Paul speaks about two ministries, two totally different ministries. Note that both of these ministries came from God, and did so with much glory. Both of these two ministries are each called by different names in our text. First there is the ministry of death, also called the ministry of condemnation and earlier in our text was called a covenant of the letter. The second is the ministry of the Spirit, or ministry of righteousness, and earlier in our text was called a covenant of the Spirit.

It might seem that this Scripture lesson is a bit confusing, but it really is not. The letter kills, the Spirit gives life. It is that simple. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Once you understand exactly what these differences are, the rest becomes clear.

First is the covenant that is of the letter. This is the ministry of death and condemnation, for the letter kills. What is this ministry? It was carved in letters on stone! It is, dear friends, the Law. God used ten plagues and Moses to lead the people of Israel out of the bondage to Egypt, then through the Red Sea with water standing up on either side. After this, Moses went up Mount Sinai and spoke with God, and there God gave to Him the letter of the Law on tablets of stone.

This is the covenant of the “Letter”, and it comes with a command, If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you. (Deut. 30:16) From Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, we know that the soul that sinneth, it shall die, (Ezek. 18:4) for the wages of sin is death. (Rom. 6:23)

God desires all people to love Him with all their heart, soul, mind and strength – and to love their neighbor as themselves. These two statements are Jesus’ own summary of the “Ministry of the Letter.” We have a hard time doing that; you might say that we find it impossible. Even God’s Word declares it true that no one keeps God’s commands perfectly; Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. (Eccl. 7:20)

The letter of the law requires perfection. Even Paul, the great apostolic missionary, when considering the law of God in his own life, bemoans the situation.

 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom. 7:15-24)

In God’s glory, Moses came down from the mountain. God’s glory shone from him as he carried the stone tablets containing the covenant of the letter, the ministry of death, the ministry of condemnation. When the people looked upon Moses, they could not stand the brilliance of that glory – it was almost as if it hurt their eyes. But it was even more than that.

God’s Law is not evil, but perfect and holy. God’s law gives all glory to God. If you and I could keep it perfectly, we would have glory and righteousness according to this covenant. But never has it been so.

You would have thought the Israelites coming out of Egypt, with all the miracles of God that they had seen, would have kept the law. You would have thought that Adam and Eve, with only one rule – don’t eat the fruit of that one tree in the middle of the garden – would have been able to keep God’s law. They all failed, as do you and me.

So, why do so many try to trust in themselves and their own works? Why do so many continue to look at their lives and think they have done a pretty good job, only to be conflicted in doubt of their eternal resting place as they see the day of their death approach?

There is no confidence in the law, in this first covenant. There are always doubts about whether we have been good enough. Whether we have loved God enough, done enough good works, helped out at enough soup dinners, served on enough church boards, were kind enough to the neighbor’s cat, parented our children in the right way, and the list could go on. When we believe we get right with God by our works according to the Law, doubts always assail us.

Of course, there is another ministry. This second one is the ministry of the Spirit, the ministry of righteousness. It is the ministry which gives life. What is this ministry? Is there better hope or any confidence in it?

Listen again to the very first sentence of our text. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. This is the second covenant in a nutshell. Our confidence toward God is through Christ.

Christ did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. (Mt. 5:17) God took on human flesh to restore what has been broken from the time of the first man, the covenant of the law. The wages of sin is death, but in Christ there was no sin. Paul’s spiritual-moral quandary never happened in Christ. While Christ was tempted, at every temptation, He victoriously overcame it.

While the wages of sin is death, Christ’s perfect life of righteousness in human flesh meant that He had not “earned” death. Death held no sway over Him, yet He submitted Himself to the judgments of men, liars in the garb of religious leaders, who found Him guilty and convicted Him to death.

They meted out upon Jesus the most horrific death penalty reserved for only the vilest criminals. In doing so, the curse of sin was laid upon Him, for cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree. (Deut. 21:23; 27:26, Gal. 3:13) He endured suffering, pain, and death – even death on a cross – to purchase you back from your violation of the first covenant – to win for you, forgiveness of sins.

The second covenant is confidence not in the Law, but in the fulfillment of the first covenant by the work and in the person of n Christ. This is the ministry of the Spirit who works and builds faith in Christ. When God looks upon those who trust in Christ alone for their righteousness before Him, He sees the ministry of righteousness. Faith clings to the person and work of Jesus Christ, this faith the Father sees – and in seeing it, see not the sinner, but Christ upon the cross. Those in the faith then are robed in Christ’s righteousness – this is the ministry of the Spirit who works faith. Robed with the righteousness of Christ, your sinfulness is no longer visible.

It is the ministry of the new covenant which fills your ears with the righteousness of Christ. It is the new covenant of Christ’s innocent suffering and death which fills your mouth His very body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of your sins.

Where is your confidence? Is it in yourself and the keeping of the law? That is a ministry of death and condemnation. We are to keep that ministry, we are to love God and our neighbor perfectly, but in that ministry here is no hope before God.

You my friends, are the beloved of God. You bask in the glory of 2nd covenant which comes to you in the flesh of God and surpasses the covenant of the letter. It surpassed the first covenant for it is, in the person and work of Christ, the fulfillment of that covenant. It is your glory, for it is God’s gift to you in Christ Jesus. It relies not upon anything that you may do – or may fail to do – but solely upon the work of God in Christ Jesus.

God’s covenant of righteousness is sealed in you in Christ Jesus and is a permanent glory that finds its splendor in the eternal God who gives it to you. What peace it is to know that while the kingdoms of this world may be in turmoil and upheaval, God’s eternal kingdom is yours. This is the peace which surpasses ALL understanding. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Amen.