

# The Letter Killeth, but the Spirit Giveth Life

Thomas R. Valletta<sup>13</sup>  
2 Corinthians 3:6

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Sitting across from me, the sister pounded her fist furiously on my desk and shouted, “Oh come on, you can’t tell me that drinking one cup of coffee will keep me out of the temple! Isn’t it the spirit of the law and not the letter that counts?”

Many of us probably remember situations in which someone misused 2 Corinthians 3:6 to excuse disobedience to the Lord’s commandments. Human nature is such that whenever we disobey the Lord we tend to rationalize our behavior rather than repent. In vain attempts to justify our behavior we sometimes resort to wresting Paul’s statement: “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” and forget the Lord’s probing question: “Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46).

## Necessity of Strict Obedience

Reading 2 Corinthians 3:6 to help us rationalize our disobedience is inconsistent with admonitions of obedience from the Lord and His Prophets. For example, the Savior likened those who obey His teachings “unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock” (Matthew 7:24). **The Prophet Joseph Smith** taught that “we have great need to live near to God, and always be in strict obedience to all His commandments, that we may have a conscience void of offense toward God and man” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 32). **President Brigham Young** added that the Gospel “requires a strict obedience to every point of law and doctrine and to every ordinance which the Lord reveals” (*Journal of Discourses*, 10:286). Strict obedience to the commandments continues to be a regular theme of General conferences (see, for example, *Elder M. Russell Ballard, Ensign, Nov. 1991, 7; President Boyd K. Packer, Ensign, May 1996, 19; President James E. Faust, Ensign, May 1999, 45*).

In one recent conference, **President Gordon B. Hinckley** exhorted the Saints: “If we will cling to our values, if we will build on our inheritance, if we will walk in obedience before the Lord, if we will simply live the gospel, we will be blessed in a magnificent and wonderful way. We will be looked upon as a peculiar people who have found the key to a peculiar happiness. (*Ensign, Nov. 1997, 69*).

## Paul’s Meaning in Context

One approach to correctly understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6 involves reading it in its historical and scriptural context. Paul loved the Saints in Corinth. His deep feelings for them dated back to the time when he introduced the gospel of Jesus Christ to them (Acts 18). In his untiring efforts to save these Saints Paul wrote letters of rebuke and correction (1 Corinthians 5:9; 2 Corinthians 2:4; 7:8–12), sent friends to minister to their needs (Acts 19:22; 1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10, 11; 2 Corinthians 7:13, 18), and visited them as often as he could (2 Corinthians 2:1; 12:14; 13:1,2).

After writing one particularly distressing letter of censure to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 2:4), Paul rejoiced when news reached him that the Corinthians reacted positively and began to sincerely repent (2 Corinthians 7:5–8, 13). However, the reports also disclosed that false teachers plagued the vulnerable flock (2 Corinthians 11).

In the latter part of AD 57, Paul wrote from Macedonia what we call 2 Corinthians. In this letter he offered warm commendation for the Saint’s spiritual improvement, challenged the false teachings of the apostates, and defended his own example in the ministry. Paul’s reasoning throughout the third chapter of 2 Corinthians indicates that the false teachers “tied their ministry in some way to the ministry of Moses and the Law” (*S. J. Hafemann, “Letters to the Corinthians,” in Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph Martin, and Daniel Reid*).

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According to **Elder Bruce R. McConkie**:

“In all parts of the primitive Church—Corinth, Rome, Galatia, everywhere—the need existed to remind the Saints that the law of Moses was done away in Christ. Since the gospel went first to the Jews and thereafter to other lineages, there were in all parts of the new kingdom those who had been subject to the old Mosaic system, a system which some of them found it hard to give up fully and without mental reservation.” (*Bruce R. McConkie, Doctrinal New Testament Commentary, 2:414*)

Paul’s purpose in chapter three was to declare that the “new testament” established by Jesus Christ replaced the old covenant established by Moses (*David R. Seely, “Is Christ Divided?”, in New Testament, Acts through Revelation. Studies in Scriptures, 6:75*).

In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul declared that Jesus Christ made him and his fellow servants “able ministers” of this new covenant. This new covenant, he states, “is not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” By letter, Paul meant the law of Moses. Written in ink and “engraven in stones” (2 Corinthians 3:3, 7), the law of Moses has no saving power without Jesus Christ and His Atonement. The new covenant, on the other hand, written by the Spirit in “the fleshy tables of the heart” (2 Corinthians 3:3) “gives life” because it is through the power of the Holy Ghost that one develops faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, conforms to Gospel laws and gains eternal life. One Latter-day Saint commentary summarized:

The new covenant (gospel) is based on higher principles and priesthood than the old covenant. To observe Mosaic prescriptions the lesser law after the higher law has been given will kill the Saints. (Kelly Ogden and Andrew Skinner, New Testament Apostles Testify of Christ, 151).

For that matter, even prior to the fulfillment of the Mosaic Law by Jesus Christ, salvation was in Jesus Christ not in the repetition of Mosaic ritual (2 Nephi 25:24–27).

## Prophetic Interpretations

Following the example of Nephi and many other prophets of old (1 Nephi 19:23), our inspired Church leaders help us understand ways to “liken” and apply 2 Corinthians 3:6 which are consistent with the principles of Paul’s original intent. For example:

1. President Heber J. Grant and President Boyd K. Packer used the verse to teach that we should listen or read by the spirit and not simply focus on the shallow surface level (*Ensign, May 1980, 63*).
2. President Romney and President Monson employed this verse to teach that knowledge gained by the spirit through obedience to the commandments is far more important than textbook knowledge (*Marion G. Romney, Ensign, Sept. 1980, 4; Thomas S. Monson, Ensign, June 1997, 2*).
3. Elder Dallin H. Oaks used 2 Corinthians 3:6 to admonish the Saints to remember that an understanding of true doctrine comes from revelation, not scholarship (*Ensign, Jan. 1995, 9*).
4. President James E. Faust quoted the verse to teach the importance of doing good and avoiding dogmatism, coercion and intolerance, and also to emphasize the importance of focusing on the saving principles of the Gospel rather than guidelines and procedures (*Ensign, Nov. 1997, 53–54*).
5. Elder Russell M. Nelson employed the scriptures to warn against “barely abiding the letter of the law instead of embracing the ennobling spirit of the law” (“*Be All That You Can Be*,” in *Brigham Young University 1984–85 Devotional and Fireside Speeches [1985]*, 16).
6. President Spencer W. Kimball quoted 2 Corinthians 3:6 in his warning that we should not merely go through the motions of keeping the commandments, but that we should obey them with full purpose of heart (*Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, 225; Conference Report, October 1951, 84–85*).
7. President Gordon B. Hinckley quoted the verse in his plea that in our callings we try to “feed the spirit—nourish the soul” (*Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley, 607*).

## Conclusion - Useful and Edifying Applications

The historical and scriptural context of 2 Corinthians 3:6, as well as the applications or “likenings” suggested above, help us understand Paul’s teaching that: eternal life comes only by living the Gospel of Jesus Christ with full purpose of heart and by the Spirit of the Holy Ghost.