

## Sabbath School Lesson #5 – Violating the Spirit of the Law – 26 Oct-1 Nov 2019

**C**hrist through Nehemiah rebuked the nobles of Israel saying: “Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their oliveyards, and their houses, also the hundredth *part* of the money, and of the corn, the wine, and the oil, that ye exact of them” (Nehemiah 5:11). Were the nobles of Israel ‘violating the spirit of the law’?

The title of this week’s Lesson, ‘violating the spirit of the law,’ is regrettably confused, as it conflates man’s law and God’s law. In this commentary, we will focus on the Lesson’s title.

Paul taught eloquently on this. “For we know that the law is spiritual” (Romans 7:14). It follows that there can be no fulfilling of the law save in the Spirit. “God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in Spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). Sometimes people talk about keeping the spirit of the law without the letter, but there is nothing in the Bible about keeping the spirit without the letter. By that expression men mean that they will keep what they think the law means, regardless of what it says. But God knows that the thoughts of man are vain. We are to forsake our own thoughts, as well as our own way. “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9). God is Spirit; therefore they that worship Him must do so in the Spirit which He supply. He provides the means, and does not ask us to worship Him in our spirit, or in our conception of His law. We are not to worship God as we think Him to be, but as He is. And no one, as stated in the text just quoted, can comprehend God, or define the bounds and limits of His will. Then no man can lay down a rule for another, or even for himself. Here is the unlimited word. No man can put a limit on the word of God, or say of any text that he has fathomed its depth, and that he has all the truth there is in it. No; the word is spiritual, and no man can fathom the depth of the mind of the Spirit of God. For this reason no man, and no body of men, is at liberty to put any construction on the word of God, or to change it, or to hold or teach that it means anything different from exactly what it says.

The law of God, which is His righteousness, is the one thing which men are to seek. Christ said, “I know that His commandment is life everlasting” (John 12:50). We also are to know the same thing. The law itself is spiritual; it is life everlasting. But life is not a figment, a fancy; it is real, and wherever there is life there must be something living. When we read the commandment is life everlasting, it does not mean that the written characters are life. They simply declare the fact. Everlasting life is in Jesus Christ. “As the Father hath life in Himself, so hath He given to the Son to have life in Himself” (John 5:26). He is the fountain of life (Psalm 36:9; Jeremiah 2:13). The commandment or law of God is everlasting life because it is His own life. Then is the life of the Spirit of God; and putting the Spirit of God into the hearts of men puts the life of God there. It is the law of the Spirit of life in Christ, it gives freedom and peace with God. “The Spirit is life, because of righteousness;” and “if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His” (Romans 8:1-2, 9-10). Nothing less than the life of Christ is the law of God; and anything contrary to the life of Christ is condemned.

“But now we are delivered from the law, being dead to that wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter” (Romans 7:6). What is the thing in which we were held, and to which we are now dead? – The seventh chapter of Romans is but an expansion of the sixth chapter, where we read that we are “dead to sin” (verse 2), and that “he that is dead is freed from sin” (verse 7). “Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (verse 11). We are dead unto the sin which held us, because sin also is dead by Christ. “Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with Him, that our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Romans 6:6). And so “we are delivered from the law.” It had been transgressed, and therefore it demanded our death; “for the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). But now that we are dead, it pursues us no further; it has executed the penalty on us, in Christ. “The law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth” (Romans 7:1). When he is dead, there is nothing more that it can do to him. “I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” (Galatians 2:20). That is a good reason why the vengeance of the

law no longer pursues us. The man who committed the sin is dead, and the man who now lives is a "new man," walking "in newness of life." The old life was a life of sin; the "new man" is after God "created in righteousness and true holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24). Notice also that since the "new man" has not transgressed the law, he is as a matter of course free.

But the law is not dead. It is as much alive as it ever was. The new man is free from it simply because he is walking in harmony with it. The new man is under as much obligation to keep the law as the old man was; the difference between them is that the new man does his duty, while the old man did not, and could not. The old man was "not subject to the law of God," being opposed to the Spirit of Christ. The new man is alive through Christ, who died "that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:4). "If ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law" (Galatians 5:18). But the verse last quoted tells us that "the righteousness of the law is fulfilled" in those who walk after the Spirit. Therefore we are taught most plainly that the only ones who are "not under the law" are those in whom the righteousness of the law is fulfilled. The transgressors of the law are the only ones who are "under the law." Those who are "delivered from the law" are the ones who are keeping it "in spirit and in truth."

This is shown in the statement that we are delivered from the law, in order "that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter." We still serve, but as free men, and not as slaves. It is a spiritual service, that is, a real service; for only that which is spiritual is real. "For we know that the law is spiritual." When we were serving in oldness of the letter, we were not really keeping the law; for since the law is spiritual, it necessarily requires spiritual service. So it is only when we are delivered from the law that we keep it.

Is there anything like 'violating the spirit of the law'? The common opinion in regard to the letter and the spirit of the law, is most erroneous. The error arises from supposing that the law of God is similar to human laws. It is quite common to speak of the *spirit* of a law made by man, when all that is meant is the *intent* of the law. Thus: No human law is perfect; its framers cannot possibly foresee all the circumstances that may arise to be judged by it. Then, too, the language of the law may be obscure. So the judge often finds it necessary to decide what was the intent of the lawmakers. A man might be technically or literally a violator of a law, while still acting fully in harmony with the intent of its framers. This is what is meant by the mistaken use of the term 'letter and spirit,' as applied to human laws.

Now the great difference between the nature of human laws and the divine law is that there is no spirit to the former, while the latter is wholly spiritual. Spirit is life; but there is no life in human laws. They cannot give life. No man can get anything more out of a human law than he puts into it. If men ignore any human law, then it is said to be 'a dead letter.' But it has no more life in itself when it is obeyed than when it is disregarded; the life is in the people, who make their acts conform to the words of the law. The law of God is wholly different. It is alive whether people regard it or not. It is alive because it is spiritual. The man who serves in "the oldness of the letter" does not really serve at all, because, no matter how good his purpose, to keep the law, he is simply reproducing himself, not the law. In trying to do what the law requires, he is merely doing what his own nature allows him to do. While in a carnal state, he is "not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Romans 8:7).

But "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:2) gives freedom from this bondage, so that "the righteousness of the law may be fulfilled in us." The real law is the life of God in Christ, and that gives life. What is termed 'the letter' of the law of God is the verbal statement of the law. This is not the law itself, but only the *form* of it, as the apostle said the Jews had "the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law" (Romans 2:20). The verbal statement of the law bears the same relation to the law itself that the photograph of a man has to the man himself. It is but the shadow. A shadow is the exact image of the substance.

So when we speak of the spirit of God's law, we mean the law itself, and not merely the intent of the law. The intent of the law may be learned from the words, since God is not subject to human limitations, but knows what is needed, and can say just what he means. From the words of the law of God we may know exactly what we should do, for it is a perfect form. But it is only in Christ that we find the living substance. The law in Christ is not only living, but it gives life. It performs itself in those who submit to it, because it is God's own life.