

# Romans Lesson 30

## The Spirit and the Letter

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In the closing ceremonies of the recent Olympic Games in Tokyo Mr. Avery Brundage, President of the International Olympic Committee, made a statement of principle which is irrefutable in every realm that has to do with the regulation of human conduct. His statement was directed to those nations who had been guilty of violating the rules governing the amateur status of athletes and who at the same time claimed to respect the spirit of the Olympics. He said, "It should be recalled that if the spirit of the Olympic movement is to prevail, the letter must be respected." It is true that if the spirit of any movement is to survive, whether it be social, political or religious, the letter must be respected.

In Christianity these two fundamentals are basic: the proper spirit: love, and the proper letter: the commandments of Christ. It is in this definition of terms that this article is written and our purpose is to present the scriptural relationship between "spirit" and "law" and to illustrate their application.

The necessity of service to God in spirit is stated by Jesus in John 4:23. "But the hour cometh and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers." That is, we must worship him with the heart as opposed to a mere empty ritual worship. Paul said, "for with the heart man believeth unto righteousness."

That under Christ there is also a law to be respected and followed is abundantly attested in the scriptures, a different kind of law to be sure than the law of Moses, but nevertheless a law. Although Paul says that we have been freed from the law, it does not follow that in the Christian age we are without law. He says in Romans 7:22, 26: "For I delight in the law of God after the inward man. . . . So then I of myself with the mind, indeed, serve the law of God." James 1:25 declares, "He that looketh into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and so continueth, being not a hearer that forgetteth but a doer that worketh, this man shall be blessed in his doing." When Paul said, "For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life," he was contrasting the Christian system which governs from within and which brings life to that of the Mosaical system which governed externally and brought death.

Jesus bound these ideas of spirit and law together when he said, "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments." Thus love is the underlying, motivating principle behind the law, and the law of Christ is the standard or guide as to how that love is to be expressed. A failure to follow the guide, the commandments of Christ, is evidence of a lack of the spirit; and a lack of the spirit, the love of Christ, is the cause behind a failure to follow the standard.

To illustrate, through the gospel love is brought into man's heart and as a result the desire to worship. As this love needs guidelines Christ has given com-

mandments or laws respecting the expression of it. Thus Christ says, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth." If man truly loves Christ there is no question as to how he will worship, he will worship in truth, according to Christ's commandments.

In this day there is a prevalent concept that so long as the spirit is right it matters not so much as to what one believes and follows in religion. Mr. Brundage reasoned correctly. It is only in religion that men reason so absurdly; and it is precisely this absurdity that has been the cause of so much religious confusion through the centuries following the establishing of the church. The truth is that if one's spirit is right, it matters to him more than anything else in the world what he believes and follows in religion; because he wants to follow nothing more nor less than Christ. Though it be true that law does not confer life, the words of Christ control life. And though it be true that law itself cannot restore life, it is also true that it regulates life. And although law cannot impart righteousness, the commandments of Christ instruct in righteousness. And when one lightly lays aside Christ's commandments on the presumption that it is all right as long as one retains the proper spirit, he has laid aside righteousness and at the same time the spirit. When one expresses love and respect for Christ with the mouth but at the same time ignores his precepts, how can his heart be "nigh unto God"? Jesus said, "This people honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men" (Matt. 15:8, 9).

The principles of spirit and law are compatible, interdependent and inseparable. Man's mistake begins when he sets them opposite to one another and teaches that the one is essential and the other non-essential.

If the compatibility of the spirit with the commandments of Christ had been recognized and followed through the last nineteen centuries much of the division, strife and heartache in Christianity would have been avoided. The "falling away" which was predicted by Paul and which had already begun in his day had its beginning when man's spirit became such that he took the liberty to begin making changes in the Divine pattern. And the further men went in the changing of the pattern, the further away they became from the spirit. The spirit became so corrupt that ultimately one tried to set himself up in the very place of Christ and tried to assume his authority upon earth. And this, notwithstanding the fact that Jesus said, "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth."

This corruption was the occasion for the reformation movement and the rise of protestantism, which brought improvements, but which left much to be done, both concerning the spirit and the keeping of Christ's commands regarding the

church. The spirit was, "Let us reform the apostate church"; when it should have been, "Let us restore the Lord's church." The battlecry of protestantism was negative, "Let us do nothing which Christ forbids"; when it should have been also positive, "Let us do only what Christ commands." We as members of the church of Christ are now engaged in this great work of restoration instead of reformation. A restoration of the spirit demands that we begin with the determination to restore the observing of the command.

In a time when the spirit of Christ is in so little evidence, this is what can be done to restore it. We must be ready and willing to make the decision to keep with all of our being every command of Christ and to lay aside all of the commandments of men in religion. This demands that we lay aside the different names that men wear religiously and wear the only name by which we can be saved, the name of Christ. This spirit dictates that we reject the creeds and doctrines of modern churches and follow only the New Testament of Jesus Christ. It demands that we do away with all human devised methods of salvation and proclaim and follow God's way of salvation as it is found in God's Word. Love for Christ demands that we cleanse the worship of God of all that which makes its appeal to the mere physical sense of men and to worship him only in spirit and in truth. It means in short that we reject all human innovation and intervention in Christ's church and accept only the will of Christ. To so act is to act in the spirit of Christ. He said, "Ye are my friends, if ye do the things which I command you."

Paraphrasing the words of Mr. Brundage, "It should be recalled that if the spirit of the Christian movement is to prevail, the letter must be respected." This is the same principle expressed by the inspired writer when he said: "And hereby we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoso keepeth his word, in him verily hath the love of God been perfected" (1 John 2:3-5).

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