***“The Letter and the Spirit”*** by S. Finlan, at First Church, November 25, 2018

**2 Corinthians 3:2–6**

2You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; 3and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared 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.

4 Such is the confidence that we have through Christ towards God. 5Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, 6who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

**John 18:33–37**

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” 34Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” 35Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” 36Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” 37Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

In Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, we see a contrast between what is eternal and spiritual, and what is past and petrified. He sharply distinguishes the vibrancy of faith from blind adherence to a fixed script. The question for us today is: are we on the steady path of spiritual living and love of God, or have we settled into a plan of comfortable conformity?

Let’s look at Paul’s words. When he contrasts the Letter and the Spirit, he is really making two contrasts, one that is very much about an issue in his *own* day and age, and one that is timeless and eternal. He contrasts the *written* Law of Moses with the *unwritten* gospel—at least, still unwritten at *that* time.

Notice how sharply he makes the contrast. He refers to Moses’ stone tablets in order to suggest that the old covenant is fixed in stone, while the new covenant is written on human hearts. The fixed and stony covenant is *deadly*; the responsive and heart-based covenant is *lively*. We could illustrate this point with another metaphor: a fixed covenant provides a foundation on the ground, but does not build the home. It is intelligent faith and Spirit that build and furnish the home.

Paul is opposing an inflexible, *fixed* law with a vibrant, Spirit-led way of living. And this has much meaning in *our* time, and in *all* times.

So now we can look to *our* time, and view our religion with a critical eye. Is our religion *fixed*, or is it *lively*? Do we sometimes glorify our Scriptures, and forget to be sensitive to the working of God in our heart? Do we have a *present*, here-and-now responsiveness to the Spirit?

Actually, any religious path can be approached in a way that chains you as though to something written in stone—*or* in a way that allows you to place God in the center of your lived experience, and to learn about God as you live in the world.

A hot topic in Paul’s day was whether or not Gentiles should convert and live under the law of Moses. He is really answering that *concrete* question at the same time that he is uttering a principle of permanent importance, when he says, in the Epistle to the Romans: “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Rom 8:2). Of course, this is very confrontational, but he wants to make sure that Gentiles are not burdened with stringent rules that they can never follow *perfectly*, which will leave them feeling inadequate and sinful.

The way of Christ sets you free. We can “walk in newness of life,” Paul says (Rom 6:4). Do you see how that is both an argument for *his* time *and* for all times?

I think this compels us to re-think what we mean by “the word of God.” Shouldn’t we recognize that the word of God is more than just the written word? The word of God is alive and responsive to human need. In Jesus, the word of God said “take heart” (Mark 10:49), and “your faith has saved you” (Mark 10:52 NAB). And it gives *new life*.

Jesus sets us free from shame, fear, and rigid conformity. We will still need to discover *truth*, but truth is never as rigid and set in stone as humans, including many well-intentioned Christians, think it is. Jesus sets us free *for* a life of love, discovery, and creativity. Faith is *this* kind of life. Faith is not just *belief*. Without this liveliness, believing in Jesus would be like believing in Mozart as a composer, but never actually listening to any of the music.

So listen to the music! *Experience* the truth! Truth is not something to which we just passively agree. Truth has to be *discovered* and *lived*. We have to test it out in our lives. And Jesus says that the revealing of truth is his mission: “For *this* I was born . . . to testify to the truth” (John 18:37).

Jesus was testifying to the truth when he said “your Father in heaven give[s] good things to those who ask him” (Matt 7:11). He proclaims the truth of the Father’s love for each one of us.

If we live for this truth, then we discover that “the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). Sin enslaves us, leaves us addicted, conflicted, and obsessed. Truth leads to peace, far-sightedness, trust in the loving God, even in the face of very *un*lovely mankind.

So now we know what we need to do—we need to seek to follow the Spirit, learn the language of love, and experience our *own* walk with God. We have to understand God *personally*, in our own unique life experience. God will give us “good things,” but also challenges. But with God’s truth written on our hearts, we will walk in newness of life.