

Pressing Through Texts in the Power of the Spirit

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding the deeper realities rooted in God's ultimate reality through the study of Scripture. It highlights how the letter of the law kills, but the Spirit gives life, urging listeners to avoid turning Christianity into a mere list of rules and to seek the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit. The message encourages a lifelong habit of pressing into the meaning of biblical texts and connecting them to ultimate realities, leading to a life of worship and enlightenment by the Spirit.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 3:6, Romans 7:10, 2 Corinthians 3:3, 2 Corinthians 2:15, Ephesians 1:18, Hebrews 1:3, Psalm 119:18, John 6:63, 1 Corinthians 2:14, Colossians 3:16

Topics: "Understanding Scripture", "Life in the Spirit"

Description

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Transcript

Let's pray together. Father, thank you for Elizabeth and Abigail and Tom, their heart, their mind, their thankfulness, the grace manifest in their lives. And now I ask for a few more minutes that grace would rest upon this moment, that I would be faithful to your word, faithful to your vision for this school, and that you would make what I say just as you have made what they said, a blessing to the graduates and the families and to those who contemplate coming here and to the faculty and to the staff and everyone else who's listening.

I ask this in Jesus' name, amen. One of my hopes for Bethlehem College and Seminary is that the education received here will implant a lifelong habit of pressing through the wording of scripture, first to the intention of the author that they want to communicate, and then through that, deeper down into the ultimate reality in which that intention is rooted. That's the habit I hope you formed and will continue to form.

Let me try to say it another way. And then I'm gonna illustrate it with a biblical text and with Shakespeare and with the coronavirus. God is the ultimate author of the Bible, and therefore, all biblical meaning is rooted in God's view of reality, which carries the added implication that all biblical meaning is rooted in ultimate reality, God's reality, who he is, the way he relates to things, the way things really are.

Therefore, the Bible has greater educational potential than any other book in the world. It can take us down into ultimate reality under all other realities, and therefore, illumine all realities by revealing their relationship to ultimate reality. So, when we say at Bethlehem we read the great books in the light of the greatest book, more is going on than meets the eye.

So let me illustrate now what I'm talking about with a biblical text and then Shakespeare and then coronavirus. We're gonna go to 2 Corinthians chapter three, focus on the second half of verse six, but I'll read you the previous context. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves as to claim anything is coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit, for the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.

So that's what I wanna focus on. The letter kills, but the spirit gives life. I wanna do with that text what I hope you formed a lifelong habit of doing.

I wanna press in first through the wording to what Paul intended. And then I wanna go deeper. I wanna push through down into the ultimate reality that that intention is rooted in.

So let's do the first. What's he referring to when he says the letter kills, but the spirit gives life? Verse seven, he refers to letters on stone. Verse three, he refers to tablets of stone.

So Paul is referring to the Mosaic law, specifically the 10 commandments delivered on tablets of stone on Mount Sinai. So the most immediate meaning of the letter kills is the law kills, the commandment kills, which is exactly what Romans 7, 10 says. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.

So the letter kills means the commandment kills, the law kills. What does he mean when he says the spirit gives life? He has in mind the work of the spirit in the human heart doing what was promised in the new covenant. Verse six, we are ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit.

Verse three, the Corinthians are an epistle from Christ written with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on the tablets of the human heart. So the spirit gives life means what letters on stone cannot do, the spirit working in the heart can do, namely give life, spiritual life, eternal life. So you can shut your Bible now, preach your sermon, teach your lesson, live your life.

And the point would be this, don't turn Christianity into a mere list of rules, whether 10 commandments or any other list of rules, because without the work of the Holy Spirit, commandments kill, rules kill. That means that when the rules, when the 10 commandments meet a self-sufficient heart, they produce either self-exalting rebellion, I don't buy those rules at all, or self-satisfied moral achievement. I can do that, in either case, death, the letter kills, the spirit gives life, that's your sermon, that's your lesson, that's exactly right, you preach that, you teach that, you live that, you sleep well, just go to bed and you're done.

Or you can go to Bethlehem College and Seminary, and you can form a lifelong habit of pressing into, yes, into and through, through the immediate intended reality, to further, deeper reality, God's deeper root realities. And the most effective way to do that that I've learned over the last 50 years is to ask relentless

questions of the text, like, Paul, why did you use the word letter? Grandma, why not law? Why not commandment? It's the commandment that kills, it's the law that kills. Why did you use this tiny little building block of all words and all sentences and all paragraphs and all meaning? Or, or and, you could ask, so what does the spirit actually do to keep the letter from killing? Because Paul clearly loves the law.

He calls it holy and righteous and good. It doesn't have to kill, it doesn't always kill. So what does the spirit really do, Paul, to keep the letter from killing? I think the answer to the first question, why did you use the word letter instead of law or commandment, is because Paul knows it's not just the law that kills.

He said the letter kills the basic building block of words and phrases and sentences and paragraph, kills, Shakespearean plays kill, Greek plays kill, philosophy treatises kill, books about coronavirus kill, sermons preached by apostles kill. They're all made of letters and they all kill, to which you should respond, probably, whoa, that's going too far because you're turning the text right on its head. If you say that the gospel that the apostles preached kills, what about nine verses earlier when we read this? We, we gospel preaching apostles are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.

To the one, a fragrance from death to death. To the other, a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? Second Corinthians 2, 15 and 16.

In other words, some people smell the aroma of the gospel as a toxic stumbling block, a noxious foolishness, and they die when they hear it. The gospel itself becomes for them a fragrance from death to death. It meets a dead heart and leads to death, but where the Holy Spirit does his life-giving work, then the gospel is fragrance from life to life.

The letter kills. The letter of the law kills. The letter of the gospel kills.

But where the Spirit is, there's life, which brings us to the second question. What does the Spirit actually do that keeps the letter, wherever you find it, from killing? How does the Spirit turn a murdering letter into a means of life-giving, life, Spirit-giving life? Paul's argument continues. You just keep reading in context.

He gets a few verses later, chapter four, verses four to six, and he gives the answer. The Spirit takes away the deadly blindness of the heart. So that the eyes of the heart can see and treasure the letters as they really are in true relationship with ultimate reality.

The glory of Christ, God, the cross, faith, the purposes of God in history, all brought into Spirit-illuminated relationship with the letter. Now, having pressed into the meaning, most immediately relevant for his context, and through the meaning, down into the deeper root reality, we begin to see the vastness of the educational implications of a lifelong habit of mind that pushes into the deeper realities of biblical texts like this. I'll close with two examples of what I mean by that.

Shakespeare, coronavirus. All Shakespearean drama is composed of letters, 26 letters, combined into words, sentences, scenes, acts, and everything you read and hear about the coronavirus, whether scientific or news reports or books like Coronavirus and Christ are all composed of letters, 26 letters, forming words and sentences and paragraphs, deadly words, deadly Shakespearean sentences, deadly daily news, deadly reformed theology, because the letter kills, it always kills, it only kills, no matter who writes it, God on stone, Paul on parchment, Shakespeare on paper, Piper on computer, they all kill, the letter kills, it only kills unless the Spirit gives life. If the Holy Spirit moves, if the Holy Spirit takes away the

deadly blindness of the human heart and brings the letter of Shakespeare and the letter of the coronavirus into their true relationship with ultimate reality and the glory of Christ and the work of salvation and the obedience of faith and the ultimate purposes of God in history, then even Shakespeare, even that drama or a shattering disease become a prism, a worship-producing prism through which the glory of God shines uniquely.

You have spent years here at Bethlehem College and Seminary reforming this lifelong habit of mind, the habit of pressing into and through the meaning of biblical text further down into the ultimate root realities that are connected to everything. And so my prayer for you is that you might live by the Spirit and that the eyes of your hearts would be enlightened to see every letter in the law, in the gospel, in Shakespeare, in coronavirus, every letter in its true relationship, its true relationship to God in Christ, producing a lifetime of worship. So Father, now, as we lift our voices again and praise you, a creator, a redeemer, the one who, according to the motto of this school, upholds all things by the word of your power, the one for whom every letter, every letter can be seen in relationship to ultimate reality and teach truth.

Come, I pray, bless these graduates with the lifelong habit of pressing into and through your holy word down into your holy reality. I pray this in Jesus' name.

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