

The Old Covenant and the New Covenant Contrasted

2 Corinthians 3

2 Corinthians 3: Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you? 2 You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; 3 clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart. 4 And we have such trust through Christ toward God. 5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, 6 who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. 7 But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, 8 how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? 9 For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. 10 For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. 11 For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious. 12 Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech— 13 unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. 14 But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. 15 But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. 16 Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. 18 But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

Background Notes

At the end of chapter 2 Paul likened the ministry to a “Roman Triumph.” 2 Corinthians 2:14-16: “*Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life.*” In this illustration, the Lord Jesus Christ is the victorious general. The triumphal procession that followed him included the general’s joyful conquering army - they represent the believers. The procession also included the captives in chains, many of whom would be put to death - they represent unbelievers.

What an awesome illustration of the truth of the gospel! The gospel that brings life and joy and victory to the believer

brings, at the same time, loss and death to the unbeliever. We need to share both sides of this truth when we present the gospel to folks around us. There is the good news of forgiveness of sin and eternal life as a gift if they receive Christ as Savior. But there is also the bad news, that if they reject Christ as the only way of salvation, there is no forgiveness of sins. There is no eternal life - rather eternal separation from God in hell. This side of the truth is not pleasant, but it is the truth.

Therefore the ministry of the gospel is very serious business. We are not to be “peddling” the word of God, or treating it lightly. *“For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ”(2:17).*

In most of chapter 3 Paul moved on to show the great difference and contrast between the fading glory of the Old Covenant and the greater glory of the New Covenant. But in the first few verses Paul once again defended his ministry by pointing to the conversion of the Corinthians themselves. In verses 4-6 Paul assured the Corinthian believers that he was not trying to bring glory to himself by defending himself from the accusation of his critics. All of his sufficiency and confidence were found in Christ!

Doctrinal Points

1. The reality of changed lives is evidence of the truth.

What was Paul getting at when he wrote, *“Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you?”(v1)?* Apparently the false apostles (as Paul calls to them in chapter 11), were trying to undermine Paul’s ministry and apostolic authority by telling the Corinthian believers that Paul did not have “letters of commendation.” Most likely they meant letters that commended Paul, written by the mother church in Jerusalem. Notice Paul’s response: *“You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart”(v2-3).*

In Paul’s response, it’s important to notice that he was not against the practice of sending letters of commendation. This was the normal practice of the early Church, and it is still a good practice today. Acts 18:27 says that when Apollos desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him - and when he arrived he greatly helped those who had believed. In Romans 16:1, Paul wrote a letter of commendation: *“I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea.”*

So Paul was not against the practice of letters of commendation. His point here was that letters of commendation from Jerusalem were not needed to authenticate his ministry. The fact that the Corinthian Christians had come to Christ

through the apostle Paul's ministry should be enough to prove that Paul was genuine! The **believers** were Paul's "letters of commendation," written by Christ Himself - not with ink but inscribed in stone, written by the Holy Spirit on the human hearts of the Corinthian believers, and now available for all people to read as evidence that Paul preached the truth.

The evidence of changed lives is still evidence of the truth of the message we preach. The world has all kinds of self-help programs that are only surface deep. Only the gospel penetrates to the heart and brings permanent life changing results.

Recently I met a young man whose life was totally turned around as a result of the gospel. He was a drifter who was searching for the meaning in life. He said he had tried everything. He heard the gospel for the first time from a former student of mine in a coffee shop on the west coast. At first he tried to argue against the gospel, but he couldn't even convince himself of his own arguments. Finally he capitulated and committed himself to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Within a couple of months he enrolled as a student at a Bible school, and he is growing in Christ as we speak! The reality of changed lives is evidence of the truth.

2. The glory of the New Covenant is evidence of the truth.

In verses 6-16, Paul went to great lengths to show how the glory of the gospel and the New Covenant far surpasses the glory of the Old Covenant. Why was this important? This was very important for the Corinthian believers to understand, because the false teachers in Corinth were *Judaizers*. The "Judaizers" were pushing the Old Testament Law and mixing Law and grace.

The end of verse 6 says, "*For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*" This verse has often been misinterpreted - that Paul's point was it wasn't the letter of the Law that counts, but it's the spirit of the Law. No, that is not Paul's point here. The word "letter" here refers to the Ten Commandments and the Law of Moses. The Law was given by God to show God's standards of righteousness - but the Law "kills." It was the "ministry of death" (v7) because no one can keep the Law. But the glorious gospel of God's grace brings life!

To be sure, there was a glory associated with the Law. After all, God Himself gave it to Moses! And when the Lord communicated it to Moses, Moses' face shone with the reflected glory of the Lord - so much so that Moses had to put a veil over his face when he spoke with the Israeli people.

But the glory associated with the giving of the Law was *nothing* compared to the glory of the gospel! "*But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious*"(v7-11).

The glory associated with the Law was a fading glory, not an eternal glory. This was emphasized by the fact that Moses kept the veil on so that the people wouldn't see that the glory, and glory that was fading away (v13).

The point of verses 14-15 is that, even to this day, when the Jewish people read the Old Testament, a similar veil lies over their hearts because they do not realize that the glory of the Law is gone, now that Christ has come. But when they turn to Christ and come under the New Covenant, the veil is taken away from their hearts and they experience the liberty and glory of the gospel. Verses 16-17: *"Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."* The glory of the New Covenant is evidence of the truth.

Practical Application

Let's experience the blessing of an unveiled face!

Verse 18: *"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord."* How do you have an "unveiled face"? In view of the preceding verses, it means that as we read the Scriptures and come to know the truth of the Word of God, we are transformed. The Bible is the mirror where we behold the glory of the Lord. As we see and behold the grace and glory of the Lord in His Word, we ourselves are transformed from one degree of glory to another! That's what "from glory to glory" means.

We reflect the glory of the Lord and we radiate the glory of the Lord because we have the life of Christ within us! We become more Christ-like in our behavior and lifestyle as we continue to keep our eyes on Christ, as revealed in the mirror of His Word. This is a great blessing for us and for those around us. Let's experience the blessing of an unveiled face.