

2 Corinthians 3 The New Covenant

Summary: Would you rather have a list of religious rules to keep or a relationship with God?

During our study of Hebrews, we said throughout history, God has let us try different ways of doing spiritual things to prove they don't really work. So, one of the first things God did was to say, 'Let's try giving you a list of rules to keep. I'll tell exactly what to do and what not to do.' It sounds like a good deal. In fact, sometimes you wish God would send you a text and say exactly what He wants you to do. But the problem is, as we learn from history, none of us can keep God's rules exactly the right way.

And the problem is with us, not the rules. Today the rules God gave to Moses are known as the old covenant, and they were good, they were glorious. The system and plan God designed was like an elegant section of programming code. The problem is, we're not computers who just do exactly what the code says. We make exceptions and additions to the code and modify it a bit for our own desires and preferences. And then, we're surprised that it didn't work.

So, after letting us try that for a while He finally said, let's do something new and He sent Jesus to establish what we call the new covenant, an even better and more glorious covenant between God and men. We'll look at the contrast between these two – the old and the new, later this morning, but first, we find the apostle Paul celebrating the effect this new covenant has had upon the lives of people he knows.

Read with me:

2 Corinthians 3:1 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.

Here's what Paul is saying – the church in Corinth, that he had not only helped establish, but had also just coached through a really rough spot of internal conflict, was like a living letter of recommendation for Paul's life and ministry and the gospel it was all built on.

If you've ever heard the saying the proof is in the pudding, it's a twist on the original expression – the proof of the pudding is in the eating – and it referred to the old British term 'pudding' which actually meant sausage. The idea was – it's hard to tell if the sausage is really good from the outside, if you want to know, you've got to bite into it and see.

Well, the same thing is true of people and churches – not that you should bite into them, but outside appearance is one thing, what's really important is what's happening inside.

As we all know, it's possible to look one way on the outside, either good or bad, and be something entirely different within.

Well, Paul is thrilled because the church in Corinth *didn't* always look so great from the outside, as we said, they had been going through some issues lately, but now there was proof, that deep down inside Christ really was present and at work, the sausage, or the pudding was good. And everyone could see it, everyone knew it.

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.

Paul took that as public proof of his ministry and the gospel, an authentication of everything he had been saying and doing. Other people wanted to emphasize their credentials with letters of recommendation. "You should trust me because I know so-and-so. You should be impressed with me because I graduated from this school. You should listen to me because I have these letters after my name..."

Paul says people should listen to me because, *look at you!* Look at what God has done in, with, and through you as you received the gospel and followed Christ. Your transformed lives are a letter written by Christ, through the Holy Spirit, and delivered by me for anyone and everyone to read. And this isn't meant to brag or boast, it's meant to marvel.

I want to pull three things out of this for us to consider here.

First, notice that as the gospel takes hold in a person's life, there will be evident change. There will be public proof. Paul says (vs 2) you are [known and read by all men](#). Friends, I want to encourage you, God is at work in your life, and as you submit to Him, others can see it. In little ways and big ways, it becomes increasingly obvious. And it's meant to be that way. You're giving off a fragrance, as we read last week, and it's a fragrance of life for everyone that loves Jesus.

Second, notice, that it is *God* at work *in you*. When Paul writes to the Corinthians,

they're on the receiving end of the action. He says Jesus is **writing** on your lives, with the **Holy Spirit**, not **ink**. In other words, it's not about *you* getting your life together. It's not all about *you* building your spiritual resume. It's not all about *you* following a bunch of religious rules. *God* is at work *in you*, doing something *to you*. Your part is to submit, to follow, to go along with it, not to resist. You know what happens if you move the piece of paper as someone is writing – it gets all messed up and they have to start again. So, when Christ is writing on you, try not squirm. Trust.

Third, notice the relationship here, not just *between* individuals and Jesus, but *among* individual believers. I want you to see the fullness of the Christian faith is meant to be worked out on two planes – vertically between you and God yes, but then also horizontally between you and the church. This is God's plan – this is what He wants to do, part of your identity is found in His family. He wants you to know people and be known by people – even the messy parts of you, because, *it's the transformation that brings God glory*. He wants other people to *see* the changes He is making in you.

Some of those people are going to help you grow, like Paul helped the Corinthians, and at some point God will use you to help others grow. This interconnectedness is His plan – our lives touching and helping each other, each of us growing, transforming, and the result as evident and legible as a letter of recommendation – a letter written by Christ.

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.

As excited as Paul is about what is happening in Corinth, He knows it's not all about him. It's about what God is doing through him.

So, I want to speak for a minute to those of you in ministry. Which, technically, would be every Christian. Whether you serve in a formal ministry role, or you're ministering to your family, or ministering to the Lord at work, I need you to notice this, because it's super important (vs 5) - **Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as *being* from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God**. I actually think there's a sense in which it's good for you to feel incompetent. It's good for you to think I can't do this, or I don't know how to handle this. As long as that inadequacy pushes you toward the Lord who is your sufficiency and strength.

Again, church, this is how life is supposed to work. You don't have to be Superman, or Wonder Woman all by yourself – you're supposed to run on the fuel of God in your life. Let Him give you direction, and then let Him give you fuel.

This is an essential distinctive of the Christian faith – God not only gives you guidance and direction for life, He also gives you the strength and ability for it.

You can come up with all kinds of ideas about your identity and purpose and passion in life, but if they're not from God, then you're also going to have to provide the fuel and strength for those things. And yeah, listen, sometimes that works. You can accomplish an awful lot through self-determination and grit and hustle. But, it will also leave you plagued by anxiety, feeling frantic at times, easily threatened or hurt or offended, overworked and insecure. Or, you could let God make you sufficient and cultivate a sense of calm, relaxed, confident, and cheerful joy, even in difficult times *because* the Spirit *gives you* life.

Which reminds Paul that it hasn't always been this way. There was a time when God just gave His people a bunch of rules to follow and let them figure it out on their own with grit and determination. That was the old covenant, life under the rules of the Old Testament epitomized by the Ten Commandments. The problem was, it didn't go so well. They were good rules, but impossible to keep by yourself. Paul calls it [the ministry of death](#) as opposed to the life the Corinthians experienced. Read with me:

[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.](#)

Paul is using what one commentator called a “cascade of metaphors” in this chapter, so it can be a little hard to follow at first, especially if you're not very familiar with the early parts of the Bible. But here's what Paul is saying – God once gave us this set of rules to live, a whole code that governed life and worship – what you could wear, what you could eat, what to do if your ox killed another man's ox. There were detailed instructions. And they were good. Take a look at the Ten Commandments for example, and try to argue against any one of them.

They tell you to honor your father and mother. They tell you don't steal. They tell you not to mess around with someone else's spouse. Don't let greed and desire drive you. Don't go around cursing and using God's name in vain.

Who is going to argue against these things? No one. At least no one who is honest and sane. But, who's going to keep them? Perfectly. All the time. No slip ups. No oops. None of us. And that's the problem.

We can see it's a good list. A [glorious](#) list to use Paul's word. It's a good way to live, but none of us can do it consistently, dependably, on our own. We needed something else, so God sent Jesus to do something [much more glorious](#) for us.

I had an interesting experience along these lines recently. I had the opportunity to get some testing done – to measure my metabolic rate and body fat – to learn how many calories I need each day, based on my own metabolism, not a general recommendation from the USDA for a 2000 calorie a day diet; and how much of my body is made up of bones, muscle and tissue, and how much is made up of fat. And then to receive some tailored, customized nutrition and fitness coaching. Each of the individuals who helped me with the tests were highly educated, certified, professionals. And each was overweight.

Now I want to super clear on what I'm saying here – I'm not trying to mock them. The irony is a little amusing. But they're not the only ones. When I was much younger, in the Marine Corps, I used to smoke cigarettes and dip tobacco. And I still remember having to sit through a tobacco cessation briefing telling us about all the evils of using tobacco and all the health problems it could cause. And when we were done, the Corpsman, or medic, who gave us the briefing came out and had a smoke with us.

The information these people were presenting to me were, to us a word from our text, [glorious](#). It was good information. But they, as the presenters, were not [partaking in the glory](#). It had left them out. And you have to wonder, with empathy, what's it like to do this every day, to present this information to people and know you don't embody the recommendations you're making?

Here's why Paul says the ministry of the Spirit is [much more glorious](#). Under the Old Covenant God just told you what to do – like the people telling me what to do to increase my physical fitness or stop using tobacco – they gave me the information, but they wouldn't or couldn't help me live it out.

But under the New Covenant God says, 'We tried that, and now hopefully everyone can see it doesn't work. You can't be good enough on your own. So I'll send My Son who will keep every aspect of the law, He'll obey everything told to Moses, and then, He'll be put to death as a perfect sacrifice for all the times and ways that you fail. And not only that, then I will give you the Holy Spirit to come and live within you and He will help you grow in Christlikeness.'

In other words, I'll not only give you the plan, I'll also give the strength to be able to complete it. I'll walk with you through it. And when you fail, because you will, I'll still love you and forgive you through Christ.

Friends, I can tell you several years later the Holy Spirit became my tobacco cessation plan. He helped me do what I could not do on my own. He did the same thing when he delivered me from the claws and clutches of pornography. For each of those monsters I had to come to the place where I said, "God I don't want these things in my life anymore, but I can't shake them on my own. If they're going to be removed from my life, You have to help." And He did.

It was a fight at times. It was a battle. But I just kept asking God in. I kept asking for His help. I kept saying, "I can't do this on my own!" I kept coming back. That was well over 20 years ago, before Madeleine came into my life. And I'm so grateful that it wasn't a matter of following some very good plan presented with nice PowerPoint slides, but that I could invite an even better God into my life to help me through my weakness.

Listen, sometimes rules are good, sometimes plans are good, sometimes recommendations for fitness and health whether physically or spiritually are good, *but what if you can't keep them?* What if you want to, and you try, but you keep failing? What if your own determination and will power aren't enough? Where can you turn?

Well, today you can turn to Jesus, and this is why [the ministry of the Spirit is even more glorious!](#) Under the Old Covenant it was you and the rules, which were good rules, [glorious](#) rules. But now, under the New Covenant, it's you and the rules *and* Jesus to forgive you and the Holy Spirit to strengthen you. *You're not on your own in life.* It's not all on you. It's not all up to you. It doesn't all depend on you. If you are in Christ, He is in You, loving you, leading you, strengthening you, and glorifying Himself in, with, and through you.

I'm sharing these personal details of my life to intentionally open a door for you – I want you to know my past, to know the battles I've fought *so that* you know the door is open to talk about this stuff here at church.

If you have things in your life that you want to find victory over, that you want to be set free of, this is the place to be. There are men and women *in this church* that have been through real stuff in life – who you see now is not what you would have seen if you had known them back then – and if you want to change too, we are happy to help point you to the Christ who can save you and change you and we are happy to encourage you as you grow.

Like Paul, I'm happy to speak boldly about the transforming power of Jesus Christ and the greater glory of this New Covenant, because it's been written on my heart, with His hand, by His Spirit and that could be true for you too.

[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.

Paul here is referring to something you can read about in the Old Testament – that after delivering the people of Israel from Egypt, Moses went up on Mount Sinai to meet with God and receive the Ten Commandments and other instructions, that glorious covenant written on tablets of stone – do this, don't do that – how to live a perfect life. And according to Scripture, when he came down from the mountain there was actually a kind of glow in his face from being in the presence of God. But he covered it with a veil, perhaps because it was too much for people to see, or perhaps because it faded over time.

Whatever the reason, the glory he experienced was hidden from others by a veil. Moses had something that couldn't be shared. And then, the same thing happened in the building of the tabernacle, and later the Temple, even the priests were kept away from the presence of God in the Holy of Holies by a veil, a curtain. Access to the presence of God was limited because people couldn't keep His glorious plan.

But then, as you know from the gospels, when Jesus died, the veil in the Temple was split in two, torn from top to bottom. You remember from our studies in Hebrews, that we now have unrestricted access to the throne of God through the work of Christ.

So, Paul says, people were once separated from God, kept away by veil, but now we're boldly proclaiming to anyone and everyone everything we know and have experienced – there are no secrets, no limits, no restrictions – there is an open door – but only one – and that door is Jesus. He goes on:

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.

Here's what he's saying – something you all know is true – spiritually speaking, there is still a veil covering people's eyes. It's no longer a veil like Moses wore, it's no longer a veil in the Temple keeping people out, but there's still a veil, like a blindfold, around the eyes of human beings who can hear you talk about God all day long, and if they are not open to receive it, if their hearts, ears, and minds, aren't ready for it, they just don't get it. They have to turn to Jesus, and then, and only then, will they be able to fully understand as 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.

Friends, this is the invitation that is offered to you today – come and stare fully and deeply at the glory of the Lord – let Him transform you. God has a plan, purpose, direction, and meaning for your life, there is a role He wants you to fill, a place He wants you to be, people He wants you to know and to affect and be affected by. It all comes as you allow Him to transform you. And that transformation comes as you behold Him, not as you try to keep a set of religious or ethical rules.

You are going to become like whatever you put in front of your eyes. This is why environment plays such an important role in growing up – not just developmentally as a child, but also spiritually. You will become more and more like the things and people you see on a daily basis - so look at Jesus.

We sing the old hymn,

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
look full in His wonderful face,
and things of earth will grow strangely dim
in the light of His glory and grace*

God is not hiding from you – there is no more veil. He invites you in. He wants to reveal Himself to you, and transform you. To improve you, help you, heal you, set you free.

All of that happens as you let His light into your life. Spend time in Scripture. Get involved in a small group – whether a home group or Bible Study. Spend time with worship music and don't just let it fill your ears, let it fill your mouth too. Sing. Even if you're not any good. You'll get better over time. Spend time in fellowship with other Christians who will encourage you, who can help you and who can be helped by you. This is God's plan.

Friends, Jesus is real. The gospel is real. The Spirit is real. And this kind of transformation is real. Paul experienced it and rejoiced. He saw it in the Corinthians and rejoiced. The church has witnessed it throughout the ages, and rejoiced. I am standing here in front of you this morning because I have known 25 years of transformation in my own life, and I rejoice. I have known the saving grace of Jesus Christ and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. He has written on my heart and given me life and it is **glorious**.

Many of you can say the same thing.

But not all of you.

Some of you are trapped, struggling, tempted, and being tried. Turn to Jesus.

Some of you can't fully see or understand what I'm saying – there's a veil over your eyes, your ears, your heart. Turn to Jesus.

Ask Him to help you see, ask Him to help you stand. Ask Him to free you, cleanse you, and strengthen you. Ask Him to write upon your heart. Ask Him to give you life and transform you – and if it feels like a slow process, keep asking. Ask Him for whatever you need. He wants to give you life. Glorious. Excellent. Ever-lasting life.

Let's pray.

Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

2 Corinthians 3 The New Covenant

Summary: Would you rather have a list of religious rules to keep or a relationship with God?

- If you had to write a letter of commendation for our church, what would it say? What would you list as reasons why someone should come here?
 - Who could you point to as evidence that God is at work in our congregation? Where do you see grace and growth? Where do you see Jesus and the gospel on display?
- What would you say about your own life – what could point to as evidence that Jesus is writing with the Holy Spirit on you? What do you hope people notice in you? (Note: I'm trying to nudge you toward things that are already there, even if only in embryonic form – what has God already done in you?)
- Are you comfortable with your spiritual life being “known and read by all men?” Why, or why not? (NOTE: If you say no, really dig into why not – what are you afraid of people seeing, if it's really all about Jesus? Why is being on display hard?)
- Have you ever ordered, or made, something that looked really good from the outside, but tasted bland or terrible once you bit into it? What about the opposite – something that looked, or smelled, terrible, but tasted amazing? What is the spiritual equivalent of that?

- Review Exodus 34:27-35 for more details about Moses' veiled face. Why do you think he veiled it? To hide the glow, or to hide fact that it was fading? Why would he want to hide that? (NOTE: good scholars land in each camp.)
- Why was the Old Covenant glorious? What was good and beautiful about it? Why was it ultimately a ministry of death?
- Review 2 Corinthians 3:7-11 and find the three if/then statements. What do you learn from comparing and contrasting these two things?
- Have you ever been broken by a set of good rules that you couldn't keep? Have you ever tried really hard to do something good and failed? Have you ever been carried through something you could not do on your own by Jesus?