

*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

*Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. 2 Corinthians 3:17-4:12*

Over the years I have seen the great value, for both the families and the congregation, of having child dedications in our Sunday morning worship services. Our dedication this morning reflected again how little children are usually much more comfortable in front of people. In general, while children may sometimes be shy, they tend to be less self-conscious in front of an audience - displaying an innocence, an openness, a fearlessness that disappears when they grow older. For those of us who have raised children through adolescence, there is a sadness we experience as our children gradually lose the comfortable, innocent, honest approach to life that comes with childhood. Even if you do not have children, a degree of self-awareness will allow you to recall your own gradual movement from living out of child-like transparency to living out a more carefully crafted identity and measured persona. The reality is that now in adulthood, apart from the transforming work of our Lord Jesus Christ in our lives, we all wear masks or pretenses of one kind or another in and through our daily relationships.

In our text for today God's Word penetrates our facades and our deceptions of insecurity, fear, self-protection and defensiveness - and then reveals to us that the Spirit of God can and will remove the veils we consciously and unconsciously hide behind - so that who we are our souls, will also be who we are in Jesus Christ - both on the inside and on the outside. This is a truth that the apostle Paul knew from his own personal experience. The words he wrote that we are reading today speak of the veils and masks that cover our hearts and souls and minds, blocking out the transforming love of God we are offered through power of the indwelling presence of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. And Paul's words also proclaim the promise of God that the innocence, openness, fearlessness and transparency we have lost, can and will be restored by the power of Spirit when we treasure the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The truth of living in a fallen world is that whatever we find to be genuine, we will also find somebody promoting a counterfeit of the genuine. Even art critics have been fooled by fake masterpieces, and sincere publishers have purchased valuable manuscripts, only to discover them to be forgeries. In Paul's day no sooner did the Gospel of God's grace in Christ begin to spread among the Gentiles than a counterfeit “gospel” appeared, a mixture of Law and grace. This was promoted by a zealous group of Jews who had become Christians, whose major emphasis was that salvation was by faith in Christ *plus* the keeping of the Law. Even more specifically they believed and taught that Christians are *perfected* in their faith by obeying the Law of Moses. Their *gospel of legalism* was very popular, since human nature enjoys achieving religious goals instead of simply trusting Christ and allowing the Holy Spirit to work.

This was the reason the apostle Paul was writing the church in Corinth. Today we are reading from the second letter of Paul that we have on our possession, where he discusses some of the things previously addressed in his previous letter – but in this letter he now also addresses the prideful, legalistic, Jewish Christians who were teaching the gospel of legalism, as well as responding to the questioning of Paul’s motives, and God’s call on Paul’s life to be an apostle - arguing that Paul had suffered too much to be a Spirit-filled apostle of the risen Jesus Christ. Two weeks ago, we looked at how Paul addressed the questioning of his motives and call in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 by arguing that his weakness and suffering as an apostle were the very means by which God in Christ was being made known in the world. His weakness and sufferings for Jesus, Paul contended, embodied the cross of Christ - while his endurance in the midst of adversity, with thanksgiving and contentment, manifested the risen power of the Jesus.

In our text for today Paul addresses the counterfeit gospel, the gospel of legalism that was being taught and promoted in the Corinthian church. In 2 Corinthians 2:17 he calls these false teachers “*peddlers of God's word*” who were preying on new or immature follows of Jesus Christ. He also references these false teachers in our text for today in rejecting their devious methods of teaching the Bible: “*But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God*” (2 Corinthians 4:2). Further on in the letter Paul wrote of how he despised their tendency to boast about their converts (2 Corinthians 10:12–18) and he points out that the reason the church was behind in their contribution to the special offering was that these religious racketeers had “*robbed*” the church (2 Corinthians 11:7–12, 20; 12:14). We get a clear understanding of how the apostle Paul felt about these religious hucksters in 2 Corinthians 11:12-15: “*And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.*”

And so how did Paul refute the doctrines and practices of these legalistic false teachers? Well, Paul was he able to reveal what was genuine faith in Jesus Christ and what was counterfeit faith in Jesus Christ - by showing *the surpassing glory of the ministry of the Gospel of the grace of God through Jesus Christ*. Paul begins by first proving the superiority of the New Covenant ministry, by contrasted the ministry of the Old Covenant of the Law with the ministry of the New Covenant of Grace. Now the biblical word “*covenant*” is an English translation of the Hebrew and Greek words that describe a formal relationship between two parties who agree to a set of promises so they can work together toward a common goal. We read of a number of covenants made in the Bible – some between people, and some between people and God. Other the latter group Scripture tells us God made a covenant with Noah, Abraham, the nation of Israel, Moses, David, the exiles and followers of Jesus Christ. All of these but the last two are based on the Old Covenant of the Law – the latter two are based on the New Covenant of Grace.

To explain the history and difference between The Old Covenant of the Law and the New Covenant of Grace would take up considerable time this morning. But on a basic foundational level the difference is that the law of God is the standard; the grace of God is the means. God's law tells us that God desires holiness to characterize the way we live; only God's grace can provide such godliness in our lives. The law of God reveals sin; the grace of God forgives sin. The law of God indicates fallen humanity’s problem; the grace of God provides God's remedy. The law of God demands performance by man; the grace of God offers provision from God. The law of God is the spiritual measuring rod that evaluates lives; the grace of God is the nurturing resource that produces spiritual life. The law of God tells us of the character of God; the grace of God reproduces that character in us. When Jesus came to earth the New Covenant of Grace came into effect. He was born, lived out his life, was crucified, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Jesus saw himself as fulfilling God’s Covenant promises - his death and resurrection would seal the new covenant and inaugurate God’s kingdom in new covenant people.

The apostle Paul speaks of difference of between the ministry of the Old Covenant of the Law and the ministry of the New Covenant of Grace in 2 Corinthians 3:9-11: *“For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.”* There was a glory to the Old Testament ministry under the Old Covenant. Glory filled the temple; the glory of God hovered over the people in the wilderness. The temple and its ceremonies, and the very giving of the Law to Moses, all had glory attached to them. But it was a fading glory, not a lasting glory because the glory of the New Covenant of grace through Jesus Christ means righteousness, not condemnation. The Law of God was not given to us to save us because obedience does not save us. The ministry of the New Covenant produces righteousness and changes lives for the glory of God. Our greatest need is righteousness, and God’s greatest gift is the righteousness we can know through faith in the risen Jesus Christ.

*Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. 2 Corinthians 3:12-16*

Here Paul cites the experience of Moses from Exodus 34:29–35. Moses had been in God’s presence, and His glory was reflected on Moses’ face. But Moses knew the glory would fade, so he wore a veil over his face whenever talking to the people, lest they see the glory fade and lose confidence in his ministry. God never meant for the glory of the Old Covenant of the Law to remain; it was to fade away in the light of the abounding glory of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul makes a spiritual application of Moses’ veil. He states that there is still a veil over the hearts of the Jews when they read the Old Testament, and this veil keeps them from seeing Christ. The Scriptures will always be a locked book to the heart that is not open to Jesus. Christ removed that veil when the veil of the temple was torn when he died on the cross - yet the veil remains as Israel does not recognize that the ministry of the Law to be temporary. But we praise God that the New Covenant is of God’s grace, so that *“when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed!”*

*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:17-18*

There is freedom of the Spirit in the New Covenant of God’s grace through Jesus Christ. This is not the freedom as we know freedom. This is not the freedom to say and do what we want. This is not the freedom to believe what we want. This is not the freedom of rights and entitlements in the country we live in. This is the freedom of knowing God’s absolute sovereignty in our lives as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit work together towards the same purpose of giving us an unveiled life of freedom from bondage to sin and the freedom to fully live our lives for God and the freedom of life over death.

*“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”* Paul tells us here that the freedom of the Spirit does not happen to us all at once but rather in an ever-increasing glory. As we surrender more and more of ourselves to God, the vision of our faith grows and sharpens because the object is Jesus himself. When the veils are stripped away, we see Jesus in his wonder, his beauty, his power, his grace, his sovereignty, his truth, his love, his joy, his glory. Because we are no longer looking at him through veils of self-defense, self-justification or self-rationalization we see him clearly, and the effect is dramatic. We are changed into his likeness! His character, and his image are reflected in who we are. We become more and more like Jesus as God sovereignly removes one veil at a time through a drastic but gentle, gradual process.

The word translated “*transformed*” is the same word translated “*transfigured*” in the accounts of our Lord’s transfiguration (Matt. 17; Mark 9). It describes a change on the outside that comes from the inside. Our English word “metamorphosis” is a transliteration of this Greek word which describes the process that changes an insect from a larva into a pupa and then into a mature insect. The changes come from within. This is how the Spirit transforms us – so that we will look like Jesus – both on the inside and on the outside.

*Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.* 2 Corinthians 4:1

Paul continues his declaration in chapter four by speaking of “*this ministry*” which is the ministry he wrote about here is in 2 Corinthians 2:12-17: “*When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.*” In these words, Paul defines his “*ministry*” as a lifestyle that is lived out of the New Covenant, which is a lifestyle of wondrous, triumphant victory. Paul is telling us that God is always leading us along in the joyful conquest of the wondrous, triumphant victory we can know in Jesus regardless of situations or circumstances or opposition or oppression or disappointment. Our ministry for Jesus is to be a lifestyle of humble influence, sincerity and cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

“*Having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.*” God alone is the one who gives us our lifestyle of ministry, and God is the one who sustains our lifestyle of ministry – and He does so by His “*mercy.*” Mercy is needed for people without resources, people who cannot help themselves. Paul always defined himself in that way. In 1 Timothy 1:15 he spoke his desperate need for the mercy of God in his life: “*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*” Paul never considered himself to be super saint but rather just a humble instrument of God. He understood how desperately dependent he was on upon God for everything - and so Paul did not lose heart.

*But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.* 2 Corinthians 4:2

This is Paul’s response to the false teachers who were using devious means to support their viewpoints. He declares he has “*renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways*” and resolved to live a New Covenant lifestyle openly and honestly. He refuses “*to practice cunning word*” by making up his own rules for life and ministry or influencing people with the strength of his personality. He also refused “*to tamper with God’s Word*” by distorting or perverting the scriptures so they might support his personal purposes.

“*But by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.*” This is an “*open statement*” of a commitment to the straightforward communication of the Word of God into any and every human experience. Martin Luther said that the word of God is like a lion. You don’t have to defend a lion. You just turn it loose and the lion can defend itself. The Word of God deals with all of the real issues of life: sex, guilt, ethics, marriage, family, money, work, food, fear, friendship, discipline, anxiety, pride, gossip, depression, healing, struggle, war, anger, love, hate, peace, grace, mercy, suffering, pain and death. The word of God speaks into every one of those issues.

The truth is that while an open statement of truth is powerfully attractive it can also be fearfully repulsive. When Jesus, the Word of God, spoke he drew admirers and detractors, followers and enemies. We still have the privilege today of opening up the Word of God so we can see the truth about God, the truth about ourselves, the truth about life. When we read and hear the Word of God, the Spirit of God Paul addresses our conscience. The conscience is where the conviction takes hold and speaks truth to our hearts, wills and souls – forcing us to either receive or resist the truth of God.

*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 2 Corinthians 4:3-4*

Because the enemy of our souls is opposed to the “*open statement of the truth*” Satan, “*the god of this world*”, will “*blind the minds*” of those who have not put their faith in Jesus Christ. The devil’s strategy is the veil of human delusion that we are adequate to handle life on our own; so then we do not see our desperate need for a Lord or savior, and tragically, it also blinds us to the ultimate judgment, the condemnation, and the death that awaits us at the end of all things apart from Jesus Christ.

*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 4:5-6*

We need to keep on telling people who don't know the Jesus that Jesus is the Lord. Why doesn't Paul tell us to proclaim Jesus as Savior? Because Jesus is first and foremost God. Jesus was the Lord before he was Savior; if Jesus was not the Lord he could not be our Savior. Because Jesus is Lord, we proclaim not ourselves but Jesus as Lord. Jesus as Lord should always be the central focus our conversations, our council, and in our communication with both believers and non-believers. Only the Lord Jesus can save the perishing. He's the one who removes the veil. Sooner or later, everyone ends up in confrontation with Jesus Christ as Lord. Paul tells us there will be a day when at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that “*Jesus Christ is Lord*” (Phil 2:10-11). The glory of proclaiming Jesus as Lord is that when a person turns to Jesus as the Lord of life, then the transformative power of God begins to operate in their life. We’ve already read that, “*when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.*” But now we read what happens next: “*For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*” Once the veil is removed from the eyes of our hearts, light begins to shine! Here Paul refers us back to Gen. 1:1–5 where God spoke light into existence at the beginning of creation and from light came life. The lost sinner’s heart is like original earth: formless and empty and dark. The Spirit broods over the heart. The Word comes and brings the light of the glorious Gospel and we finally see Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior. The sinner then becomes a new creation, and starts to bring forth fruit for the glory of God.

*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. 2 Corinthians 4:7–12*

From the glory of the new creation, then Paul moves to the humility of the “*jars of clay.*” Followers of Jesus Christ are “*jars of clay.*” Earthen vessels are a very good description of basic humanity. God is the potter, and we are the clay. He shapes us and molds us into any kind of utensil or implement that he desires. The noun, “*jar*” refers to a container serving a very specific purpose like a jug, cup, pot or pan.

Don't miss the marvel of Paul's definition of our humanity. As people of a new covenant lifestyle, as “jars” created for God's use, we are all made from the same stuff. We are made of earthen, common, run of the mill clay, fragile and easily broken. No matter how smart or how strong or how skilled we might be - underneath we are all just ordinary people. Yet we have a treasure, the transforming power of the light of the gospel, within us: “*For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*”

Why would God put something as precious and powerful as the treasure of the transforming power of the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ into weak vessels like us? Because God wants to use weak things. By design God entrusts this treasure to failing, faulty, weak, and sinful people so it will be clear the power does not originate from us. It isn't the result of a strong personality, or of great wisdom or of extensive experience, education or training – but rather solely from the presence of God within us. Our earthiness must be as apparent to others as the power is, so that they may see that it is not us but God. And this should be especially so considering the battles we fight every day in the arenas of life.

“*Afflicted in every way, but not crushed.*” This is a picture of a gladiator being forced back into a confined space in combat. We would say he's cornered. But Paul says we are not crushed or frustrated by the struggles of life because we have Jesus Christ indwelling us, living his life through us.

“*Perplexed, but not driven to despair.*” This is a play on words in the Greek language and means “at a loss, but never totally at a loss.” In other words, the gladiator may be momentarily bewildered by his foe's battle strategy. But in Christ, we are never left in *total* despair. He has already defeated the enemy.

“*Persecuted, but not forsaken.*” This literally means “to be pursued or hunted down like an animal.” It is the language of the arena, as the gladiator would be hounded by his foes. But in Christ we know that God will always be with us. Though we may be persecuted by men, we will never be abandoned by God.

“*Struck down, but not destroyed.*” The picture here is of a gladiator who gets cut down, badly wounded, and falls to the ground. This the reality of living in a fallen sinful world. We know we will not escape the universality of suffering in this world. But in the risen Christ we know there is no ultimate destruction.

“*Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.*” Here again we see the ministry Paul spoke of in the first verse of chapter four: a lifestyle that is lived out of the New Covenant, in which God is always leading us in the joyful conquest of the wondrous, triumphant victory we can know in Jesus regardless of our situations or circumstances, opposition, oppression or disappointments. In these last two verses we see the promised result of being “*afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed*” is the beautifully attractive crucified and resurrected life of Jesus Christ being consistently expressed through us. We see this, once in each verse, when “*the life of Jesus*” following the expression of the “*death*” of Jesus. To be “*manifested*” means to be “made public” so that everybody can see. All of this reflects the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. This is the ministry we are called to in the New Covenant of Grace. The transcendent power of God gives us hope when we want to lose heart, and it makes us courageous even when we are not. What we can experience is the life of Jesus. We can live out his life before our family, friends, co-workers and the world around us. As people are watching us go through affliction, perplexity, persecution and catastrophe, they see in us, not a person about to explode or blow apart, but someone who actually expresses the power, the character, the beauty, the joy, and the attractiveness of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. Our ministry for Jesus is to be a lifestyle of humble influence, sincerity and cooperation with the Holy Spirit, so that who we are in our souls, will also be who we are in Jesus Christ – both on the inside and on the outside, regardless of our situations or circumstances, opposition, oppression or disappointments. The test of a true ministry is not stars, but scars. Our call is to focus on the treasure and not on the vessel, and on the Master and not on the servant. Amen? Amen!

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