

2 Corinthians 3

The Transforming Work of the Spirit

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? ² You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our^[a] hearts, to be known and read by all. ³ And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered 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.^[b]

⁴ Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. ⁵ Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, ⁶ 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.

⁷ Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? ⁹ For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. ¹⁰ Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. ¹¹ For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

¹² Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. ¹⁶ But when one^[c] turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷ Now the Lord^[d] is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord,^[e] are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.^[f] For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Sermon Outline:

1 The Spirit makes believers living letters.

II. The Spirit makes men to be sufficient ministers of the new covenant.

III. The Spirit produces a ministry of righteousness with glory and permanence that the ministry of the law could not do.

IV. The Spirit removes the veils that covers men's minds and transforms their lives.

Main Idea: The Spirit enables us to behold the glory of the Lord and be transformed into his image.

Background/Context

In our previous sessions in 2 Corinthians we saw that Paul had to explain his reasons why he had not returned to Corinth at the time he had originally planned. It was actually for the benefit of the Corinthian church – they were not yet ready to receive him because they still had work to do in the forgiveness and restoration of a repentant believer and they possibly needed to do more personal repenting on their own part. It was not that Paul was fickle and vacillating, as his critics had charged, but his delay for their benefit, to give time for them to respond to the will of God, to the work of his Spirit among them.

Then Paul talked about how believers are an aroma to those around them – either of death or life, depending on how people respond to the gospel.

Then in 2:17 he affirms the sincerity of the God-commissioned apostles, of which he was the leader: 17 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.

Now as Paul continues on in what we call chapter 3 there is not a break in his argument. He continues to defend his ministry among the Corinthians and so he really outlays a defense of his ministry based upon the great work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

It's like, "Brethren, think about your lives. Look what the Spirit has done and is doing with you all. This is something amazing and supernatural. We didn't do this but we were

only instruments that God used to bring the gospel to you. It was the Spirit who enabled you to believe and respond and who is doing a mighty work within you.

Did the Lord use us among you or not? Were we ineffective instruments of God? Is there no proof that the Lord had blessed our ministry among you? Look at your own lives. Look at what's been happening in your own hearts. This is something that God himself is doing. We didn't do it, but we were the catalysts, the instruments that God used. Think about all this, brothers and sisters.

Likewise, think about your own lives for a minute – you whom Jesus Christ has met and arrested, like the apostle Paul was arrested by Christ on the road to Damascus – Christ has arrested you, he has seized your life, and he has made you his own. Think about what has happened to you internally. A great spiritual transformation has been taking place within your hearts and in your minds, in your souls, since you met Jesus. This is the great transforming work of the Spirit of God.

He has given you new affections – affection for himself, for his Word, and for his people. And he has made thoughts and words and behaviors that used to be a part of your everyday lives has offensive, even at times, repulsive to you. You had found yourself in a great warfare, a warfare with indwelling sin. You used to be content, comfortable with your sin. Now it is uncomfortable, even something you hate and despise and repent of. The great truths and doctrine of our Christian faith have become precious to you. You believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his Son and our Lord and Savior. You believe in Jesus' death and resurrection which purchased your salvation. You believe that after his suffering he was raised and appeared to his disciples and then ascended to the Father's right hand, and that he will come again to judge the living and dead. This most holy faith you believe with all your heart and mind and you have confessed him in the waters of Holy Baptism when the minister lowered you into the water and you rose to walk in newness of life. Now you would likely die a martyr's death rather than compromise any of these great truths of the gospel, the gospel of your salvation.

Oh, dear Christian, are we not blessed above all peoples of the earth? Do we not have the true knowledge of the true God? Are we not forgiven people because of the blood of Christ poured out on Calvary's cross? Does the Holy Spirit not indwell our hearts and enable us to cry out to God, "Abba, Father?" Do we not hold Jesus Christ as worthy of all worship and praise and service? Do we not believe that our God will dwell in our midst in the new heaven and earth? Do we not rejoice over the great things that our God has done in our behalf and in behalf of all his people? In the words of Andrew Peterson's song, we would have answer, what? We do! We do believe these things!

Well, the beloved apostle is writing to the Corinthian church, the saints at Corinth, these holy people living in a pagan culture, similar to our own culture, and he reminds them of some things, in particular of the great transforming work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. He is reminding them that he and his fellow gospel workers were the instruments that God used to bring the transforming power of the Gospel of Christ to them. Paul and Sosthenes and Timothy were the specific instruments that the Spirit used to communicate the gospel to them, to convince them of its truth, and then to begin transforming their lives, causing them to grow more and more into the image of Christ their Lord. Has this not been your experience, dear fellow believer, ever since you met the Lord Jesus Christ? Have you not cause to rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory? How would we answer? *Yes, we do.* Amen, yes, we surely do!

Well, let's plunge into this great chapter 3 of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians.

If you have an ESV Bible, you see that this chapter is divide into 4 paragraphs, and this is quite convenient for here we can see that there are 4 major ideas that Paul is presenting that show some great truths about the work of the Holy Spirit.

I. The Spirit makes believers living letters. V. 1-3

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? ² You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our^[a] hearts, to be known and read by all. ³ And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered 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.^[b]

Evidently there were people who had come to Corinth after the apostle Paul had left (remember, he had spent 18 months there earlier, founding and establishing this church [Acts 18:11]) and had letters of recommendation from so-called leaders and important persons which declared their worthiness to be listened to and followed. Actually, these were probably some of the “false apostles” who by their teachings were seeking to lead the Corinthian believers away from the pure doctrines of the faith that Paul and his companions had taught them.

Paul is saying here, “We don’t need such letters of recommendation. After all, we have something better and surer than letters written on paper by men– we have you yourselves to testify to the great work of the gospel in your lives. You are living epistles, living letters. All people need to do is listen to you, to listen to your declaration of faith in the truths of the Gospel, to look at your lives of service and devotion to Christ. all they have to do is hang out with you a while and see what kind of people you are, all they have to do is observe your transformed lives: you were once worshippers of pagan idols and engaged in every kind of sin and immorality and wicked practice that was common in that city. But look at you now, you are transformed people, proclaiming the gospel yourselves, and awaiting the return of Christ as you live holy and godly lives in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

And how did all this happen? Was it because we apostles were so wise and intelligent and skilled that we could convince you to change your lives? No, says, Paul, but I was by the Holy Spirit of God, writing not on tablets of stone, like the 10 Commandments were written, but the Spirit writing on you own human hearts.

John Calvin describes what had been happening to them like this:

...[this was not like what belonged] to the ministry of Moses. The law was engraven on stones, and hence it was a literal doctrine. This defect of the law required [it]to be corrected by the gospel, because it could not but be brittle, so long as it was merely engraven on tables of stone. The gospel, therefore, is a holy and inviolable [unchangeable and irreversible} covenant, because it was contracted by the Spirit of God, acting as security.

So, dear friends, think of you own lives. What do people read when they see your life, and my life? What kind of message are you giving off by your life? What do people observe about you in your words, your attitudes, your behavior, your beliefs? What kind of letter are we to those around us? Hopefully our faith in Christ is shining through – not always, of course – but most of the time. May the presence of Christ and our faith in him become clearer and clearer to those around us.

So we see that it is I. **The Spirit who makes believers living letters. V. 1-3**

Let's look at the next paragraph, verses 4-6:

4 Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. 5 Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, 6 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.

Here we see that...

II. It is The Spirit makes men to be sufficient ministers of the new covenant.

In paragraph one we see that it is the Spirit who makes believers to be living letters, living epistles, so that by our very lives we are advertising the Lord Jesus Christ. We are an aroma of Christ wherever we go, as Paul described us in an earlier place in this letter.

In this paragraph see that Paul is saying that he and his fellow gospel workers were not depending on their own human abilities to be able to minister the Gospel of Christ to these people but they were totally dependent on God himself. Where did their ability to be effective ministers lay, in their own skills or supremely in God himself.

When Paul uses this phrase ministers “of the letter,” he is referring to the Law, to the OT law delivered by Moses to the people on Mt. Sinai, after they had come out of Egypt. But this is not the ministry that Paul and the other apostles had; theirs was a ministry of the Spirit.

There is a great difference between a ministry of the letter, or the law, and the ministry of the Spirit. Paul says that the ministry of the letter brings death, it kills, but the ministry of the Spirit brings life? What does he mean by this?

He means that the preaching of the Law, the Law of Moses, as the way of salvation cannot save anyone, because if a person tries to attain righteousness before God by his or her law-keeping, he will utterly fail. Why is that? It is because of the indwelling power of sin. The law is good and holy, but the problem is that we are not. We are born with a sinful nature passed down from Adam. We are born with a rotten, corrupted inner spiritual nature and heart, that may try to keep the law, but it always fails because the power of sin within a person prevents them from being able to keep the law of God. They may be able at times to outwardly keep law, for example, they may be able to keep the 6th commandment, “you shall not murder,” but in their hearts they have hatred and anger towards others, so in the eyes of God they have sinned just like a murderer has, who actually kills people.

But Paul is saying that he was not preaching a Law-keeping gospel, a gospel that was preaching that through obedience to the Law, one could find righteous standing before God. He was preaching the gospel of a new Covenant – a covenant established by Christ’s death and resurrection, a covenant that imparted the life-giving Holy Spirit who would change men and women internally, and enable them to love and keep the Law of God with a new power. It would be a fulfillment of the promise of the new covenant:

33 (E)For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: (E)I will put my law within them, and I will write it (E)on their hearts. (H)And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' (U)for they shall all know me, (U)from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For (K)I will forgive their iniquity, and (L)I will remember their sin no more." Jer. 31:33-34

So God promised to write his law on their hearts and to be their God, to be in living, active relationship and communion with them. They would truly know the Lord, and he would forgive their sins. A merely Law-keeping religion could do none of these things. It is too weak because of the power of sin. Sin wins every time.

But in the new covenant that establishes, God wins every time in the lives of those he sets his love upon. He conquers indwelling sin by the power of the Holy Spirit and he forgives sin because of the work of Christ applied by the Spirit to the lives of believers.

The prophet Ezekiel also spoke of this new covenant to come:

25 (B)I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from (S)all your uncleannesses, and (I)from all your idols (U)I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you (V)a new heart, and (W)a new spirit I will put within you. (X)And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 (Y)And I will put my Spirit within you, (Z)and cause you to walk in my statutes and (AA)be careful to obey my rules. Ezek. 36:25-27

The whole key to this new covenant is the work of the Spirit who changes the human heart from stony and hard to, as Ezekiel calls it, fleshy, that is pliable in the hands of God, submissive to God, devoted to God.

The next section of chapter 3 is verses 7-11:

7 Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, 8 will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? 9 For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. 10 Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. 11 For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

We see here that...

III. The Spirit produces a ministry of righteousness with glory and permanence that the ministry of the law could not do. V. 7-11

Paul calls the old covenant, the “ministry of death.” That is a strong designation, is it not? Yet he also says in verse 7 that it “comes with glory.” Then he talks about the incident when Moses came down from being in the presence of Yahweh on Mt. Sinai when he had received the law and his face shone with the lory of the Lord and the people, the Israelites, could not stand to look at Moses’ face because it reflected the holiness and purity of God. So Moses put a veil over his face

Notice in verse 9 Paul calls the ministry of the law the “ministry of condemnation.” He uses these terms to capture the truth that no one could be justified before God under the Old Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Covenant of the Law. Again, the great spoiler, the thing that negated the ability of the Law to justify anyone, is men and women’s sin. So this covenant only led to condemnation before the court of heaven and death for those trying to keep the Covenant of Law. They had to die, eternal death, under the judgement of God.

Yet Paul says this Mosaic Covenant did contain glory. It contained glory because God ordained it and the Law was perfect and righteous and reflected the righteous character of God and his perfect Law.

So although this Old Covenant had glory attached to it, the New Covenant of the Spirit was, as he says in verse 9, “a ministry of righteousness” that far exceeded the Old Covenant in glory. Why is this? Because the New Covenant had the power to apply

righteousness to the believer, which the Old Covenant was powerless to do because of man's sin.

By comparison, the old Covenant had no glory (v. 10) in relation to the New Covenant. It is like when the full moon is bright in the sky, but when the sun comes up we cannot see the moon anymore because the far greater light of the sun overcomes it.

Additionally, Paul says in verse 11 that his New Covenant is permanent. The fading glory on Moses' face which was a picture of the fading glory of the Old Covenant. But the New Covenant was permanent because it had a better priest, Jesus; a better sacrifice, Jesus' blood instead of animal blood, and it was permanent, because Jesus' priesthood was permanent – he lives forever. The OT priests were constantly dying.

Let's look now at the last section of this passage:

12 Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, 13 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. 14 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. 15 Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. 16 But when one^[c] turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. 17 Now the Lord^[d] is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord,^[e] are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.^[f] For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Here we see that...

IV. The Spirit removes the veils that covers men's minds and transforms their lives. V. 12-18

It is the power and truth of the gospel, the fulfillment of the OT prophecies that makes Paul and his companions so bold and sure and certain. They were convinced by the scriptures, by the power of the Spirit, and in Paul's case – he had even seen and been taught by the risen Christ.

When Moses, however, came down from Mt. Sinai, after God had given him the Law, his face was veiled. The people could not stand to look at the glory of God being reflected off of his face because it was shining with the awful holiness of God. Yet that glory was fading, symbolic of the fact that the Old Covenant was going to fade away. Even today, there is a veil that still covers the minds and understanding of the Jews when they hear the OT read. They continue to be unable to see and understand that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the promised Messiah of Israel.

In the last two verses, verses 17 and 18, we read more about the work of the Spirit, which has been a major theme of this passage.

How can they understand? It's only if the Holy Spirit removes the veil and reveals Christ to them. Then they will be able to turn to the Lord in saving faith. What I think Paul is communicating to us is this: that for us who believe in Jesus, it is the Spirit, who indeed is God, the third person of the Trinity, who moves within our minds and hearts and regenerates us. He brings us out of spiritual death to spiritual life. He births spiritual life within us.

And the Holy Spirit enables us to repent of our sins and believe the Gospel and become partakers of the New Covenant. As members of the New Covenant, we are free from the bondage of the Law, we are free from the enslavement of our own sins which inevitably leads us to condemnation and death because of our inability to keep the Law.

And the Spirit removes the veil from our minds and eyes, so that we can behold Christ and be transformed by his glory. The more we behold him, the more we embrace and understand his Word, the more we become like him, like his glorious image, and all this is made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit. Glory be to God for the sovereign and gracious work of his Spirit!

So today, we have seen in this chapter that...

The Spirit makes believers living letters.

The Spirit makes men to be sufficient ministers of the new covenant.

The Spirit produces a ministry of righteousness with glory and permanence that the ministry of the law could not do.

The Spirit removes the veils that covers men's minds and transforms their lives.

(Main Idea) All these great works in the lives of believers and in the ministry of the apostles are brought about by the ministry of the Holy Spirit who enables us to behold the glory of the Lord and be transformed into his image more and more. Unending thanks be to God for his gracious work in our lives. Amen.

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