

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*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 3:18. ESV)*

The New Covenant Is Better

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2 Corinthians 3:4-11

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 3:4. I mentioned last week that we have reached a bit of a hinge or transition in Paul's letter. It is not a complete change of topic – for the entirety of this Epistle the issue of Paul's Apostleship will lie behind everything else that is discussed – Paul understands that who you listen to IS what you believe – those issues CANNOT be divorced from each other. The church is built on the foundation of the prophets and Apostles with Christ as cornerstone. Jesus didn't write a book he commissioned APOSTLES and therefore you have to have the right Apostles – you have to have the right interpreters of Jesus or you end up with a Jesus who is not Jesus and who will not save you in the end – THAT'S the BIG PICTURE issue and it runs throughout the letter from start to finish, but here in this section there is a change in emphasis. In essence Paul is saying: "Let's put a stitch in this conversation about my Apostleship. Let's stop talking about me as a messenger of the Gospel and let's start talking about the message of the Gospel itself. Because at the end of the day that's the big concern. If you get the wrong messenger you get the wrong message AND THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING! So instead of comparing messengers for a minute, let's compare messages. You are struggling to receive my message because it is coming to you in a very human, very frail vessel. My treasure is contained in a jar of clay and that bothers you. It shouldn't bother you because the YES of God is ALWAYS hidden inside an apparent no. But it does bother you, so let's work with that. You've got these great looking false teachers who are very attractive to you.

They are very shiny and so you are inclined to listen to them. I understand that, but for just a second let's look inside the box. Forget the wrapping, let's take a look at what's inside.

That's the transition that Paul's making here; and so he begins making a contrast between the New Covenant and the Old. Now that clues us into the fact that at least some and perhaps most of the false teachers Paul has in mind here are from a group that scholars usually refer to as "the Judaizers". These were constant opponents of Paul all throughout his ministry. These were folks who were far more Jewish than Christian who advocated for the Jewish forms of worship as still binding upon followers of Christ. They wanted people to get circumcised, they wanted people to keep the Sabbath, they wanted people to observe the Old Testament feasts in addition to trusting in Jesus. They had a sort of faith plus works view of salvation and Paul understood them as calling people back into something that had been surpassed and fulfilled through the life and death of Jesus Christ. So Paul makes an argument that is made several times in the New Testament. He says that the New Covenant in Jesus' blood is BETTER. Its not opposed, its not unrelated – it comes out of the Old Covenant but it is infinitely and gloriously BETTER! Why would you go back to the shadow when Jesus is here as the substance? Why would you go back into promise when all the promises of God are YES and AMEN NOW in Jesus Christ? That doesn't make any sense, Paul argues, because the New Covenant is so much better.

That's the argument. We'll read the text, we'll open and examine the text and then we'll spend some time at the end applying and responding to the text. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 4.

⁴Such 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.

⁷Now 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. (2 Corinthians 3:4–11 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

The New Covenant Is Better:

Paul's argument here is very similar to the argument he makes in Galatians and it has even more parallels with the argument made in the Book of Hebrews. In all three epistles the main idea being advanced is that the New Covenant is BETTER. We can notice three particular aspects of that contrast in this passage. First of all Paul says that the New Covenant is better:

1. Because it brings Spirit and life rather than law and death

We see that in verse 6. He says that he is a minister of the New Covenant which is not of the letter but OF the Spirit and then he says:

For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (v. 6b. ESV)

Probably no aspect of Christian theology has been more misunderstood by modern Evangelicals than the relationship between Spirit and letter, grace and law. Part of the problem is that Paul was trying to pull people out of a ditch on the opposite side of the road than most of us modern day Evangelicals are walking on. Paul was trying to keep people from becoming legalists and traditionalists and ritualists – that's not our problem; that's not our ditch! Most of us were born half way into the ditch on the other side. We hate tradition, we hate ritual and we hate law. We are inclined to what's sometimes called "antinomianism" the idea that if you love Jesus you can do pretty much whatever you want and so we take what Paul's saying here as permission to run off naked and stupid into the wide world of sin believing that the grace of God in Christ has made the holiness of God of no further significance to us but that ISN'T what Paul is saying here – not by a long shot.

The best interpreter of the Apostle Paul is obviously the Apostle Paul and so if we are confused about something he said we should look at some of the other things he said to other people that might bring clarity for us. Before you decide that what Paul means here in 2 Corinthians 3 is that the law is bad and has no further purpose you might want to listen to what Paul says to the Romans:

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! (Romans 7:7 ESV)

the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. (Romans 7:12 ESV)

The problem is not with the law per se – the law is good in that it shows us the will of God. The problem is that the law does not make us able to DO the will of God. The law does not provide what it requires – THAT’S the problem with the law.

Think of it like this – the law is like a fence that marks off all that is beautiful and good and helpful from all that is evil and ugly and bad. It marks off “God” from “other”. But the fence isn’t capable of keeping us inside with God because we are really good and jumping fences. The problem therefore isn’t really the fence – the problem is us! The problem is the human condition. Because of Adam’s sin and very much in line with Adam’s sin, all human beings are born doubting God and addicted to things “out there”. We simply don’t believe that good things are found in God – we are afraid of God in fact and not in a good way. We think that God is stodgy and boring and restrictive and cruel. That’s the lie that has been whispered in our hearts. We want to go “out there” and we believe that good things can be found out there. So we go. We see the fence as we hop over it – we even hear the little hum of electricity – the fence is electrified – Paul says that in verse 6; he says that the letter – the law – kills – it is electrified – it has the power of death in it – but we hop right over it nonetheless. We are like a rabid dog that despises its master and wanders away from everything that is good and beautiful and safe.

That’s who we are – and that’s why the law is ineffective. It shows us what is good but it does not change what we want. We need a new heart – we need to WANT to stay home, that’s the only solution and that is exactly what God promised in the Old Testament. In Jeremiah 31 God said:

³¹“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³²not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 31:31–32 ESV)

There will be a NEW COVENANT God says and it will NOT be like the Old Covenant. You jumped over the fence, God says – you broke my covenant – but I am not just going to build a bigger fence – I’m going to make you a better dog – that’s what God promises in Jeremiah 31, he says:

³³ I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. 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,’ for they

shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (Jeremiah 31:33–34 ESV)

Do you hear that? I’m not going to build a bigger fence – I’m going to make you a better dog! I’m going to CHANGE WHERE YOU WANT TO BE! I am going to BOND YOU TO ME – that’s how you get a dog to stay home! I remember a number of years ago my brother had a German Shepherd. It was CRAZY BONDED to his two little girls. We would go to his cottage and sit in our lawn chairs at the beach and watch this crazy dog pace up and down the dock as his daughters swam in the lake. If they got too far out for her liking she would jump in the water and drag them back to shore by the back of their life jackets or even by their arms. It got to the point where my brother had to lock the dog in the house when the girls were swimming. That dog didn’t need a fence because it never wanted to be more than 5 feet from her loved ones. That’s what God is going to do, he says. I’m going to make you love me and I’m going make you love being home. You won’t NEED the law to tell you what’s right and wrong – because I’m going to WRITE IT on your hearts.

The letter of the law kills because it simply condemns you as you jump over it into death and ruin. The letter tells you that you’re lost but it doesn’t bring you home. Only the Spirit can do that and the Spirit is uniquely the gift of the New Covenant - which is one very obvious reason why the New Covenant is marvelously and gloriously better.

Secondly, Paul says that the New Covenant is better also:

2. Because it brings righteousness rather than condemnation

We see that in verses 7-10. Here Paul begins to speak of the superiority of the New Covenant in terms of its GREATER or SURPASSING glory. This is actually a really important point. Sometimes Evangelicals overdo this contrast between the law and the Spirit. We hear this as though Paul is saying that the law is bad whereas the Spirit is good but that isn’t what he’s saying. The contrast is not bad and good its glorious and MORE GLORIOUS. Hear that. The Old Covenant was GLORIOUS. It was GRACE. It was a GIFT FROM GOD FOR OUR GOOD – can you say amen to that? Nowhere in the Bible do you find anyone casting aspersions upon

the law of God. Listen to Jesus for example; he says:

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them....¹⁹Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17–19 ESV)

Do not think for a second that I came to tear down the fence – and woe unto any teacher who thinks his job is to move the fence. God doesn't change so if the law is an expression of that which is good and beautiful and right in reference to God then obviously it will never change. I didn't come to move the fences, Jesus says, I came to do what the law itself knew needed to be done. I came to change the human heart. I came to forgive sin and to give the Holy Spirit. That's what Paul means when he says the New Covenant is a Covenant of Righteousness – he's not talking about our righteousness – he's talking about the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ. In Romans Paul says:

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” (Romans 1:17 ESV)

The heart of the New Covenant is what Martin Luther called “The Great Exchange”. Basically it works like this. Jesus lives the life that we didn't live. He loves God and he delights to do his will. He FREELY and WILLFULLY LIVES at the centre. That's what God wanted from the first. He wanted human beings in his image to WANT to live according to his Word. Jesus did that – JESUS IS THAT. He is the life before God that earns all the rewards and blessings promised by God. That's why Paul said that all the promises of God are YES and AMEN in CHRIST! He did it! It is finished! He passed the probation, he finished the race and claimed the prize – pick your NT analogy. He did it. He did for us what we could never do for ourselves AND he paid for what we did do in his body on the cross.

Think about that. Even if you woke up and came to your senses way out there in the badlands and even if all of the sudden you wanted to go home and even if you KNEW the way – HOW COULD YOU COME BACK still covered in all the filth and sin of the world? How could you go UNCLEAN into the presence of a Holy God? You couldn't – even with heaven earned you would still be UNFIT. That's why Jesus had to die as well as live. His life can be the life you owe God and his death can be the death you owe God. That's the GREAT EXCHANGE. You

go to the cross and leave all your sin upon Christ. You repent and you confess. You hang it there and it gets paid for in his body on the cross. And by faith and trust and humility you take up the mantle of this life. You put on the Robe of His Righteousness and you stand now as a son – as an heir and child of God. Repent and believe on Christ – that’s how you go home. That’s why Jesus said:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6 ESV)

The Old Covenant told you what was required for eternal life with God but it did not give you the power to do it – and we lost the power to do it when Adam sinned. That’s the great dilemma of the Old Testament – nobody, not even David the best of men – is able to do what God requires. Therefore the promises always lie in the future and the prospect of possessing them gets dimmer and dimmer with every chapter that we read. But then all of the sudden, in the opening verses of the New Covenant the people living in darkness see a great light! Jesus has come! He’s come to do for us what we could never do for ourselves and to pay for what we have done in his body on the cross. He’s come to take us home – obviously that is better.

Thirdly, Paul tells us that the New Covenant is better:

3. Because it is permanent rather than provisional

A couple times here Paul talks about how the Old Covenant was fading away – it was provisional; it was clearly looking forward to something that would replace it. He says in verse 10:

Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. (2 Corinthians 3:10 ESV)

Again, he is not saying that the Gospel makes the Law BAD – he is saying that the GLORY of the Gospel shines so brightly that the glory of the law is ECLIPSED and surpassed. One famous theologian put it this way:

“Because the sun rises, all lights are extinguished”.¹

When the sun comes out it shines so brightly that every other light becomes unnecessary – not bad – unnecessary. There is an analogy for this that we experience every morning. When the sun comes out the moon does not EXPLODE – the sun is not the ENEMY of the moon – but when the sun rises, in all its incomparable glory, the light of the moon fades away. The moon was useful – it provided some light in the darkness – but it is no longer needed by those who walk in the bright light of day. So it is with the glory of the New Covenant. It is here to stay – it will never be surpassed because there is nothing more glorious than the Son. The Son of God is the VERY BEST OF GOD to us and there is nothing BETTER.

Application And Response:

I’d like to suggest two ways for us to respond to this teaching. As I mentioned already Evangelicals have struggled to respond appropriately to this teaching – we have taken Paul’s corrective to a law leaning people and we have used it to justify our own headlong plunge into libertarianism and moral excess. That’s an abuse of this passage. Let me suggest therefore two appropriate response to what we’ve read this morning.

1. We should appreciate the law while rejoicing in the Spirit

That seems to be the attitude commended by the Scriptures. Nowhere EVER do we find someone in the Bible disparaging the law of God. It just doesn’t happen. The early Christians LOVED the Old Testament Scriptures and they certainly did not understand Jesus as having loosened or changed the moral requirements of God – if anything they understood Jesus as TIGHTENING and CLARIFYING and CLOSING OFF LOOP HOLES. After all Jesus said:

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27–28 ESV)

If anything it seemed like Jesus taught a HIGHER standard than the Old Testament law – no one in the Bible and no one in the early church thought that a New Covenant Christian was free to

¹ Karl Barth in *The Resurrection Of The Dead* (translated by H.J. Stenning; New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1933), 81 as cited in Seifrid.

disregard what the law said about the holy character of God. In fact the Apostle Paul said to the Ephesians:

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, **that we should be holy and blameless before him.** (Ephesians 1:3–4 ESV)

Do you see that? God hasn't changed who he is and God hasn't changed what he wants. What's changed is what he's given us to get us there. He's given us BETTER GRACES and a more GLORIOUS COVENANT but the end goal remains the same. For us to be HOLY WITH HIM. Therefore the attitude we should have towards the law is one of respect and appreciation. We should be thankful for what it says about who God is and about how God wants us to live before him and with one another. The law is our friend – but it is not our Savior, therefore let us rejoice in Christ who forgives our sins and gives us the Holy Spirit.

Secondly and lastly:

2. We should be bold in sharing this Good News with others

I'm cheating here and looking ahead at the passage we'll be dealing with next week. In the very next verse of 2 Corinthians 3 Paul says:

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold (2 Corinthians 3:12 ESV)

We are bringing very good news. To people who know that they are lost; to people who know that they are blind – this light of the Gospel is the fragrance of life and the hope of our salvation – don't be shy about sharing it. To those with eyes to see – this is going to look and sound and smell like LIFE FROM THE DEAD. To those who are perishing, to those who don't know or care how far they've wandered from God, it will smell like death. Therefore pray like crazy and preach this Gospel every chance that you get.

Let's make that our resolution for 2016. Let's FRESHLY APPRECIATE the law of God. Let's read it so as to know who God is and how he would have us live before him and with one another right now and for all eternity. And let's PRAY LIKE CRAZY – STARTING TONIGHT for the

Spirit of God to open blind eyes and to soften dead hearts to receive and believe the implanted and saving Word. Let's take that message **BOLDLY** to our friends and to our neighbours for the glory of God and the good of all people – **STARTING RIGHT NOW** and throughout this year to come. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let's pray together.