

2 Corinthians 3

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I want you to back up one verse into 2 Corinthians 2:17. Paul says, "For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ." I read that verse because it kind of introduces us to where Paul's going in this third chapter. Paul is dealing with false teachers who had come into the church at Corinth, which is pretty typical, right? Almost everywhere Paul went there were the false teachers following, heckling, and hassling him. They were attacking his character, and they were attacking his teaching and his authority.

These false teachers, especially in light of what we're going to read tonight in chapter 3, were believed to be what were called "Judaizers." The phrase "Judaizers" means that they were Jews who were telling Christians that in order for them to be saved they had to become Jews, so they were Judaizing the Gentile believers. They were telling them they had to be circumcised, they had to keep the law of Moses, they had to follow the Old Testament commandments and laws, so they were legalistic. They were following Paul and trying to overturn the things that Paul was teaching about the new covenant in God's grace.

One of the problems with the church at this time was that they had a lot of itinerant traveling preachers and teachers. In those days they couldn't get on the internet and check out a pastor's sermons and listen to his teaching, they couldn't listen to what he had to say, they couldn't do e-mails or texts or Instagram or Facebook or whatever, YouTube. You couldn't check anybody out, so what they would do is carry with them letters of commendation. They would actually show up at a church with letters from another church commending them as being teachers or apostles or prophets or whatever.

The problem was there was a lot of charlatans or false teachers who were manufacturing their own letters of commendation and weren't really called by God. They were, as we read here in 2 Corinthians 2:17, corrupting the word of God, which means to peddle. They were what we call hucksters. They were making it a profitable business. They were selling the Word of God. They were basically false teachers, false prophets, and they were shysters ripping people off and corrupting the Word of God.

Paul is writing in 2 Corinthians 3 to deal with these Judaizers, which were legalists teaching Jewish legalism, and they basically taught too that you had to get saved and you had to be sanctified by keeping the law. They're not all dead, they're still alive today. This is not just some history that we don't need to deal with, there are those today that feel that you have to be good to get to heaven or work to get to heaven or keep laws, keep rules, keep the rules of the Old Testament, the dietary laws, Sabbath day; and they're very legalistic and think that you have to be living a holy life by keeping law.

As we study through the book of Romans, we're going to learn that we are saved by grace through faith, and not only that, we're sanctified by grace through faith in Christ alone. Amen?

We're saved by grace, we're sanctified by grace, and we're not going to be sanctified by the works of the flesh or by the keeping of the law.

Going with me to 2 Corinthians 3, Paul deals with this issue of having letters of commendation. Evidently, they were attacking Paul saying, "He has no authority. He has no letters of commendation. The church in Jerusalem has not endorsed or approved him," so they were attacking Paul's credibility.

Paul begins in verse 1 and says, "Do we begin again to commend ourselves?"—note the question mark. This is a rhetorical question that expects a "no" answer. Paul's saying, "Do I have to again commend myself? Do I have to defend myself?" All the way through 2 Corinthians, and especially toward the end of the book, Paul is almost embarrassed that he's got to actually defend himself when he knows he's called by God, he's an apostle of the Lord, so it's just really hard for him to do that. He's basically saying, "Do I need to commend myself to you?" " . . . or need we,"—apostles—"as some others,"—need epistles of commendation or letters of commendation. The "as some others" in verse 1 is a reference to the false teachers. They had their letters of commendation. Paul says, "You need that from me?"—"epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you?" So, "Do I need a letter commending me to give to you or do I need one from you to give to me?" Paul's talking about how ludicrous this is.

Without skipping a beat, Paul says in verse 2, "Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men." Basically, what he's going to say is, "I don't need letters of commendation, you and your lives changed by the ministry of the Word of God and the Spirit of God transforming your lives is evidence of my being called of God and being an apostle of God." Paul didn't get into his wallet and pull out a clergy card and say, "I'm a clergyman. Look at the card I have and my letters of commendation." Paul basically says, "Look at your life. I led you to Christ. I've disciplined you in Christ. The Spirit of God used the Word of God in my ministry to transform you into the image of Jesus the Son of God." He's basically saying, "You are my letters of commendation," verse 2, "Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men."

One of the evident ways that you can tell whether someone is sent from God or called by God or gifted to do ministry is fruit. Jesus said, "Ye shall know them by their fruits." God will use their lives to bear fruit for His glory. When someone says, "I'm a minister," but there's nobody he's ministering to and there is no ministry taking place and no lives have been changed, you've got to question whether or not they have been given that gift or that calling to do ministry. Paul says, "The evident sign of my ministry is your lives, is that God's Word has been written on your hearts, and you're ' . . . known and read of all men.'"

One of the great indications of a true ministry is transformed, changed lives. Amen? Someone said, "You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day; By the things that you do and the words that you say, Men read what you write, whether faithful or true, Tell me, what is the gospel according to you?" People are watching you, they're watching me, and they want to see how

we're living and if we're truly born again, filled with the Spirit, walking in obedience to the Lord. Our lives are like letters or written epistles.

Paul says, verse 3, "Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ,"—Paul was the author writing their lives through the power of the Holy Spirit—"ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshly tables of the heart." He's going to then begin to compare or contrast the old covenant and the new covenant; the old covenant which was being promoted by the Judaizers, and the new covenant of grace which Paul was the preacher of. So, " . . . the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone"—which was the old covenant under the Mosaic law, but it was the new covenant where the Spirit of God would write His laws on the—" . . . fleshy tables of the heart,"—and we would be changed by the power of God's Spirit and set free in Christ. So, the " . . . fleshy tables of the heart."

Verse 4, "And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward: 5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God." In verse 4 he basically is saying that our ministry, my ministry, is that of confidently trusting God through Christ. Notice the phrase, "God-ward;" so we trust, we have through Christ, God-ward confidence. If I were going to free-paraphrase that, I would say, "In our ministry of the new covenant, we're trusting God through Christ, and it's a confident trust in God, to do the work in people's hearts."

I love verse 5. He says, "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God." One of the keys to ministry in the general sense is you don't trust in yourself, you don't put confidence in yourself; you put your confidence in Christ, you put your confidence in God, you put your confidence in His Word, you put your confidence in the message that you preach, but you do not trust in yourself. One of my constant prayers, and God does a pretty good job on me, is to keep me humble and dependent and reliant upon Him. Whenever you begin to think that you're something, God has a way of pulling the rug out from underneath you, doesn't He? Gently, He does it gently; He does it lovingly, but He wants us to understand that we need Him. I've always loved verse 5 that " . . . our sufficiency is"—not our self-sufficiency, it's not of ourselves, but is—"of God." We don't need people to train us how to do ministry, the Word of God, the Spirit of God, the models of godly men who serve the Lord can be our models, and our sufficiency and our trust is in the Lord.

Beginning in verse 6, Paul's going to contrast Moses and the two covenants—Moses and his ministry of grace through Paul, and then the two covenants since he's dealing with these false teachers who, as I said, were Judaizers. He says in the last statement in verse 5, " . . . our sufficiency is of God; 6 Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament"—or the new covenant. Notice who made them able ministers, God did. So, God calls you, God enables you, God empowers you, God is your sufficiency. God enabled them to be ministers of the new covenant—" . . . not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." Paul is contrasting, very simple, he uses different terms to describe it, the old covenant which is a covenant that has faded away and now the new covenant has been established by God, so

Paul is a new covenant minister, not an old covenant minister, or what he calls the “letter,” or the law, and the new covenant is that of “ . . . the spirit”—which gives, I love it—“life.” I love that concept. So, we are “ . . . able ministers of the new”—covenant.

Remember when Jesus met with His disciples and established what we call the Lord’s supper and He took the bread and took the cup and said, “This is the new covenant in My blood, drink ye it.” We are new covenant Christians. The old covenant is passed away, God has established a new covenant. Actually, six hundred years before Christ was ever born, check it out in Jeremiah 31, God promised a new covenant where everyone would know the Lord, from the youngest to the oldest, and that God would write His laws on the fleshly tablets of our heart, we would all have a personal relationship with God that would be based on God’s grace. So, Paul’s going to contrast these two covenants as he does in these verses so clearly.

Now, Paul makes reference to the Spirit and then makes reference to the letter. The Spirit is that which works in the new covenant, that’s why He works in our hearts, creates in us a new heart; the letter is a reference to the law or the old covenant. Verse 6 has been misinterpreted quite a bit. There have been some that say “ . . . for the letter killeth,” and say that’s teaching the Bible, just teaching the Bible will bring spiritual death. That’s not what it’s talking about. It’s not talking about the “letter” being the Bible, it’s talking about the letter being the law or the old covenant. Notice, “ . . . for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” Why? Because the law can save no one.

Those who think they can be saved by the law, how do you get saved by the law? All the law can do is condemn you; all the law can do is show you your sin. The law has no power. The law has no ability to save you. The law has no power to forgive your sins. You can read the law, you can try to keep the law, but because of our weakness and our flesh and our sinful hearts, we will sin, we will break God’s commandments. You break only one law, you’re a law-breaker, “ . . . the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ . . . ” The old covenant under law brings death, “ . . . but the spirit”—under God’s grace, under the new covenant—“giveth life.”

Verse 7, Paul says, “But if the ministration of death,”—that’s the old covenant—“written and engraven in stones, was glorious,”—and it was indeed glorious—“so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away.” Notice that he makes a clear statement here, and he’ll develop it more, that that glory that did exist in the old covenant...when God gave the law to Moses on Mount Sinai, remember Moses actually came down from the mountain, saw the people of God dancing around a golden calf, they’d already broken God’s law before they even got the law, so Moses broke the tablets of stone, went back up to the mountain, God gave him fresh new tablets of stone, he came back down the mountain. But we know that they had broken God’s law before Moses even came on the scene. Moses now has brought the law, but it has been broken, and the law that has been broken is “ . . . the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones . . . ”

But Moses' face was shining and glowing from being in the presence of the Lord, so he had to put a veil over his face, and we're going to see tonight that one of the reasons that veil was placed over Moses was not just so that they could look and not be blinded by Moses' glowing, but because that face of Moses, that glow in Moses' face, was going to fade. It would be fading away, and it would remind them of the fact that the old covenant was fading away or vanishing away, so he had to cover his face. That's why it mentions " . . . the glory . . . to be done away." There was glory in the old covenant. It kind of explains what God's nature is like, God is holy, God is righteous, God is just, so it's got glory; but it's going to be a fading glory. There's no way that we can be redeemed or born again.

If you want to do a lot more study on this subject, you want to study the book of Hebrews. The book of Hebrews was written by Hebrews to Hebrews to tell them not to be Hebrews. It was all the way through the book of Hebrews saying that Christ is superior to the old covenant—better priesthood, better blood, better tabernacle or temple. Everything was better about the new covenant. The old covenant had its splendor, had its glory, but the new covenant is so much more glorious—God veiled in flesh come to redeem us, being born of the Spirit, being indwelt by the Spirit, being transformed by the Spirit into the image and the likeness of Jesus Christ.

If you're a Christian, and God has changed your heart, and God has changed your life, you know the splendor and the glory of what it means to be transformed unto that new covenant relationship with God and that work of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 7, the old " . . . ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away,"—because Christ would come on the scene.

Verse 8, "How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?" In other words, if the old covenant had glory, how could the new covenant not likewise be glorious and even more glorious? From verse 8 down to verse 11, we're going to have a series of "much mores." Paul liked to use the "much mores." It's an argument from the lesser to the greater. If, lesser, the old covenant had glory, how much more will the new covenant have greater glory, continuing glory, through the blood of Jesus Christ and the work of His death upon the cross.

Verse 9, Paul goes on to say, "For if the ministration of condemnation"—here again, he's using all these different kind of titles for the old covenant and the Old Testament, too—"For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory." How wonderful is the new covenant. I love it when we break bread and we drink the cup. We hold the bread remembering that it's a picture, a type, of the body of Jesus Christ. It's not the blood of a lamb or a bull or a turtledove or a goat, it's " . . . the precious blood of"—Jesus—"Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." So, Jesus is the better sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit actually comes into our hearts and takes out our heart of stone and gives us a new heart of flesh. The Scripture says, "Therefore if any man be in Christ,"—we're going to get that, by the way, in 2 Corinthians 5—"he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become"—brand—"new." You're a new creation in this new

covenant, so it's even more glorious. So, “. . . much more doth the ministration of righteousness”—again, the new covenant there is called the ‘ministration of righteousness’—“exceed in glory.”

Verse 10, “For even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth.” You say, “Run that by me again? What did he just say?” He's basically saying that in comparison the new covenant is so much more glorious that it's like the old covenant had no glory at all. It's just far exceeded and outweighed the old covenant in glory.

Verse 11, “For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious.” He comes to the end of this section where he's talking about the glory of the new covenant as being superior over the old covenant. Why would you want to go back to the old? Remember in Hebrews it said, “. . . there remained no more sacrifice for sins . . .” Why would you want to go back to the old and the condemnation? The law only can judge you and condemn you. It can't save you. It has no power to give you life and forgive your sins.

Verse 12, “Seeing then that we have such hope”—that means in light of the new covenant, in light of what Jesus did on the cross we have hope—“we use great plainness of speech,”—Paul's going to talk a bit about preaching the cross and preaching Christ, but because the new covenant is so clear and so glorious and so wonderful, he's basically saying that when we share the gospel, we do it very boldly, very simply, very clearly, and very confidently.

On Sunday morning in the book of Romans 1, we're going to be looking at the key text, verses 16-17, where Paul said, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation . . . to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” And in the gospel, “is the righteousness of God revealed”—that's the new covenant preaching. We are preaching not a creed, not a conduct, not a code. We're not preaching views or ideas, we're preaching Christ. We're preaching the nature and person of Christ. We're preaching the work of Christ. We're proclaiming who Jesus is, what Jesus did on the cross, and we can all do that with “. . . plainness of speech,” and great boldness as we share the gospel and that people come to Christ in the new covenant.

Verse 13, “And not as Moses”—so we speak plainly, openly—“not as Moses, which put a vail over his face,”—and here's why—“that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is abolished”—God was trying to protect them from knowing that the old covenant was going to fade or be abolished.

Verse 14, “But their minds were blinded,”—‘their minds were blinded’ is referring to the nation of Israel, predominantly the Jewish people. He's saying their minds were blinded, verse 14,—“for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ. 15 But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart.” So, they are blinded, we're going to see, to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, that Jesus is the promised deliverer, the Lamb of God, the Savior of the world. Even to that day that Paul wrote, even to this day, the Jews are blinded. They don't see Christ. They don't understand that

veil, now as a veil over their minds and their hearts, and they can't see and understand that Jesus is their Mashiach or the Messiah. It's kind of a mind-blowing thing when it's so clear in the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah. You wonder, How can they read Isaiah 53 and not see the parallel that this is a reference to Jesus Christ? But their hearts are blinded. Their eyes have been blinded. The veil is over their face. They cannot see.

Along with this we should read, when you get a chance, Romans 11. You can read Romans 9, 10, and 11 where Paul deals with the subject of Israel and salvation, and he talks about Israel's election, then Israel's rejection, and Israel's restoration. But there's coming a day when the veil will be taken off their eyes and they will then see and understand Jesus is their Messiah, and Paul says in Romans 11 that " . . . all Israel shall be saved" This is yet future. This, I believe, probably will happen after the rapture during the tribulation period, and there'll be the greatest period of time of Jewish evangelism in the history of the world. So, verse 15, " . . . even unto this day, when Moses is read,"—all the time Moses is read today in the synagogues and in the Jewish places—"the veil is upon their heart."

Verse 16, "Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away." Which is what I was just mentioning Paul describes in Romans 11. So, to this day there's a veil, but the veil will be taken away. They will turn to the Lord. The "it" most likely is a reference to their hearts, when their hearts turn to the Lord and that veil will actually be taken away.

Verse 17, "Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. 18 But we all, with open face"—or unveiled face—"beholding as in a glass"—it's a reference to a polished metal, we would call it a mirror—"the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." He comes to the end of that section and the end of this chapter and says actually that, "But we all, with open face beholding as in a"—mirror, in the new covenant, in His Word by the Spirit—"the glory of the Lord,"—we're being—"changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."

In verse 17 because Paul was a preacher of the new covenant, and in the new covenant it brings liberty, verse 17, " . . . there is liberty." Another way this is quite often misinterpreted is in churches where they have no order and it's not " . . . done decently and in order" and they just go crazy when they worship, they'll use this verse to say that there is great liberty in the new covenant and we're free to worship however we want. This is talking about liberty from the law, verse 17, not liberty to roll on the floor and swing on the chandeliers and bounce off the walls, do whatever you want, however you want. Remember 1 Corinthians, "Let all things be done decently and in order." The Spirit of the Lord is there to guide us and to glorify Jesus, never to glorify us. But the "liberty" mentioned in verse 17 is liberty from the law. Then, in verse 18, we actually have that the new covenant produces in the believer a sanctified life and is changing as into Christlikeness.

So, we have liberty, verse 17, which would be salvation. We're not under the law—we're free from the law, we're free from the penalty of the law, we're free from the condemnation of the law—and Romans 8:1 says, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ

Jesus.” Verse 17 is salvation; verse 18 is sanctification that, “. . . we all, with open face beholding as in a”—mirror—“the glory of the Lord, are changed,”—it’s a process—“into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

I think one of the biggest, sad tragedies is that so many Christians don’t understand or make a distinction between salvation and sanctification. Salvation is when you are declared righteous, you’re justified. Sanctification is God making you more righteous over time, not immediately and never perfectly, but you’re growing in likeness to Jesus Christ. It’s a lifelong process. So, we are saved, we’re sanctified, we’ll be glorified. I’ve been saved, justified; I’m being saved, sanctified; I will be saved, glorified. I’ll be in heaven perfectly righteous free from sin. Salvation, justification, is that I’m freed from the penalty of sin; sanctification, I’m being freed from the power of sin; glorification, I will be free from the presence of sin altogether. Amen? That’s why Romans 8 is so glorious, what begins with grace will end in glory.

By way of wrapping up this chapter, in the new covenant hearts are changed. God changes hearts. You know if you’ve been born again that Jesus changed your heart. The things you used to love, you now hate; the things you used to hate, you now love. Your desires have changed. Your love has changed. Your interests have changed, so you become a new creation, you become a new person.

In the old covenant, no change of heart, just a sinful heart of flesh. Under the new covenant, we have life. John 3:16, whoever believes on the Son of God has everlasting life. How marvelous that is! Under the old covenant there was no life. The law could not give life, it only brought death and condemnation. Under the new covenant, it is more glorious. How marvelous! I love the doctrine of God sealing us with the Holy Spirit until the day of redemption. That is the guarantee or the down payment. That’s that assurance that I’m saved, I’m forgiven, I’m a child of God. The fact that my heart’s been changed and Christ dwells in me by His Spirit is a guarantee that I will be in heaven some day.

Fourthly, it brings freedom—whom the Son sets free is free indeed. Amen? Everything Paul said in this third chapter is basically him dealing with the fact that the Judaizers were preaching the law. They were preaching the old covenant, which is a “. . . ministration of death” Paul was a preacher of the new covenant which focused and centered on Christ—who He is, what He’s done, and the Spirit of God changing hearts, changing lives through salvation, sanctification, and one day glorification. Amen? Let’s pray.