

2 Corinthians 3:7-18 (NIV)

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, ⁹ will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? ⁹ If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! ¹⁰ For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. ¹¹ And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

¹² Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.

¹³ We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. ¹⁴ But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵ Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. ¹⁶ But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

¹⁸ And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

We're in Second Corinthians this morning, chapter three, if you'd care to turn back there. Second Corinthians, the third chapter.

By way of context, let me just remind us that the Apostle Paul founded this church at Corinth on his second missionary journey. Yet, problems arose there such that he had to make a quick return visit, and he had to write probably three corrective letters, the second of which, we think is lost. Further, he sent Timothy there to help straighten things out, and he had to make an additional visit to Corinth afterward.

All this to say, though Paul loved the Corinthian believers very much, there were several ongoing conflicts in their fellowship, and today's passage addresses a big one: that of *what Jesus does to Judaism*.

This issue became a problem at Corinth because of a group of people known as Judaizers. They were Jews who had accepted that Jesus *was* the Messiah, yet they insisted that Christians follow the Mosaic law.

Essentially, they believed that Christians had to live as Jews, which led to a confusing situation, leaving both Gentile and Jewish Christians to ask, "So, what, *really*, is *required* of us to follow Jesus?"

That's a legitimate question, and frankly one that is still asked by many, because there are, today, and have been for all these centuries, all sorts of different nuances to the teaching of the Church worldwide regarding the "rule of Christianity."

What is required of us to follow Jesus?

Can I drink, can I smoke, can I have short hair or long hair?

Can I suffer disease, can I be divorced, can I be remarried, can I feel same sex attraction, can I believe in reincarnation or aliens, can I wear shorts or short sleeves, can I marry someone of a different race or caste, can I have two or more wives or husbands...

Can I do or feel or believe in this or that – and still be a Christian?

The church, through the ages, has asked *all* those, and a thousand other qualifying questions at one time or another.

So, what happened at Corinth did not end the questions. Every age has had them.

What Paul tried to do was to help those asking the questions about the minute to take a step back and see the larger picture.

According to Paul, there was nothing at all wrong with the Jewish Law. Paul tells the Roman church that the Jewish Law is, "*spiritual, holy, righteous and good.*"¹

He says here in verse 7 that the Jewish Law was glorious, in and of itself. It came with so much glory, in fact, that the Jews could not even look at Moses' face after he'd met with God. Moses had so much splendor that he had to cover himself.

Still, the glory of the Law, Paul says, was fading, just as the shine faded from Moses' face over time.

The glory of the Law was fading because the Law itself was fading. Its purpose was fading.

The Law was designed by God to be a temporary arrangement: a way for the Jews, and any others who would, to know God.

The Mosaic Law and the Jewish sacrificial system and the priests and temple and animals and all of that: that was all a *placeholder* until God would usher in what would become the *permanent* arrangement.

And that, Paul declares, has now happened in Jesus and in the presence of God's Spirit.

God's whole purpose of calling humanity to Himself and renewing and restoring his sin-broken world was begun right after the fall in Eden.

It was put into *active* motion with God's call of Abraham, and it was helped along in the right direction with the development of Moses, the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, and the establishment of the Law there in the wilderness.

But now, you see, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, the system of sacrifice and the priesthood have reached fulfillment, have reached their pinnacle. Jesus has become both the Great High Priest *and* the perfect sacrifice.

¹ Romans 7:12,14 (NIV, paraphrase)

That's how Paul could write there in verse 10, "*Even as glorious as the Law was, now it really has no glory at all compared to what is in Jesus.*"

And in the coming of God's Spirit, the law of God is now written on the hearts of every believer. God speaks person to person, spirit to spirit.

So, there's been a sea change, and all for the better, you see? All because of Jesus.

So, logically to Paul, it would be ridiculous to consider returning to the way it was.

It's like when caves or huts or tents were all that people had to live in, they were perfectly fine.

But who wouldn't rather live in a beautiful house?

When horses and buggies were all we had, they got us where we needed to go.

But notice there's not one out there in the parking lot today.

Carrier pigeons did the job just fine until these came along [hold up cell phone].

And if there's no reason to go backward in any of those ways, then there is absolutely no reason to return to the Old Covenant (the Mosaic Law), because the new one is *so much better*.

It is effective where the old was not.

In Jesus and His Spirit, God has done what the Law could never do and was not designed to do. It was a tool, a good, great and even glorious tool toward fulfilling God's vision for our world.

But it is Jesus and the Spirit that complete the vision.

And what is that vision?

Complete and total redemption. Restoration.

God's vision has never been for the world to keep limping along—slogging along forever through sin and all of its effects.

No, God's vision is for a world that is restored to the way He designed and created it to be initially, a world that's beautiful and peaceful, healthy and lovely—glorious!

A glorious world: that's what God is out to accomplish.

The Old Covenant, the Mosaic Law, was just a tool in that process. A good tool, yes, but nothing more.

It is the *New Covenant*—God's new arrangement in Jesus and the Spirit—that is bringing it to completion.

A redeemed, restored world: that is God's vision. That's where God's going, so that's where the Corinthian church had to go in order to follow God.

They couldn't go backward.

Only those who cannot see forward—only those who have veils over their vision—would want to go backward.

And since God's vision is a restored world—since that is where He's going, that's where we're going too.

That's what we see as the inevitable and God-designed future. And, as His people here in Wilmore,

Kentucky in 2023, it's our privilege to be on board with that.

Our church has put it like this: we are with God on the way to *a community that reflects Jesus' vision and values*.

That's our vision statement. That's how we interpret God's vision for His world.

What does it mean?

Well, first, it means *a community*.

Of course, God was never out for just the Jews to embrace Him and His plans and His vision. That's one of the big errors the Jews fell into. Somehow, they came to think that *they* were the *only ones* God loved, the only ones He wanted to bless.

But that was never so. God wanted to use the Jews to bless the rest.

God has always intended to redeem the *whole world*, the "whosoever will" of the world.

And that's what we mean by *community*.

Certainly, we want all of us here, but we also want everyone around us—*whosoever will*, as far as our reach allows: they are part of our community. Our neighbors, our towns, our states, our nations, our races and people groups: we see in the future an ever-widening circle of restoration.

That's the sort of community God has in mind.

God sees, and so we see, a community *that reflects Jesus*.

Everything revolves around Jesus.

Apart from being the centerpiece of God's New Covenant, Jesus is also the epitome of God's standard for our world.

Paul calls Jesus the "Last Adam."² Unlike the first Adam, the Adam of Eden, Jesus is the one who lived a life of perfect obedience to God and His will, which makes Jesus not only our way to God, but also our perfect example of a God-pleasing life.

So, we want ourselves, as His church here, and all who will respond to Jesus in faith, every community we're a part of, we want all of us to reflect Jesus, to live God-pleasing lives of obedience.

We want to be, ourselves, and we want to help create all around us, a community that reflects Jesus. And we mention two specific ways: Jesus' vision and Jesus' values.

Reflecting Jesus' vision means to see as Jesus sees. This requires a transformation of sight, because Jesus sees differently than the unredeemed, unrestored world sees. He always has and He still does today.

The unrestored world sees the weak and vulnerable as objects to be exploited. Jesus sees the weak and vulnerable differently. He sees them as worthy of the special protection and care of others.

The world sees the poor as pathetic and pitiable. Jesus sees them as uniquely blessed.

² 1 Corinthians 15:45

The world sees suffering as something to be avoided at all costs. Jesus sees it as something that will refine us and make us more like Him.

The world sees the love and pursuit of money as the answer to all problems. Jesus sees the love of money as the root of all evil.

The world sees earthly power as a great source of efficiency. Jesus sees earthly power as a great source of corruption.

The unredeemed world sees death as the hopeless end. Jesus sees death—for those who follow Him—as the glorious beginning.

Jesus' vision is different, and we who follow Him want to see—and we want all around us to see—the way He sees.

We want to reflect and to influence our world to reflect Jesus' *vision*.

And then, we also want to reflect and help our world reflect Jesus' *values*.

Jesus never compromised His Heavenly Father's moral standards.

Yet He was able to separate the sin from the sinner and to truly see and love and embrace the *person*, while at the same time despising the person's behavior. The world does not understand that, especially in our day, but that is part of God's character.

That is precisely why, while we were still sinners, Jesus died for us.³

If the sin of the world was not a problem, Jesus wouldn't have had to die.

If Jesus did not love us deeply, He wouldn't have chosen to die.

So, we want to reflect that part of Jesus too.

Our intention is to have in our hearts the love for the lost that Jesus had in *His* heart, while still valuing what God values: never compromising with sin, never justifying sin, never saying sin is fine.

We want our church—our greater community and every community around us—to reflect Jesus' values, so that we can all participate in God's redeemed and restored world.

That's God's vision: a redeemed world.

That's why there is a New Testament.

That's why Jesus came, and that's why God sent us His Spirit—to give us the power to make possible a restored world.

The Law and the Temple and the sacrifices and the priests: they could never accomplish that.

But Jesus and His Spirit can.

Jesus and God's Holy Spirit: they're doing it even now, and God will complete it—and we want to be a part.

A glorious world restored to the glory it displayed before the fall.

That's God's vision.

Can you see that?

Don't you want to see it come true?

We all do. We're all—the whole earth, Romans 8 says—groaning for it. The world itself is groaning for God's restoration to be completed.

But you see, for that to happen, we have to leave the former things behind, whatever that might be in our lives.

For some at Corinth, that was the trappings of the Old Covenant. They loved it and appreciated it and were comfortable with it.

But as glorious as it was and as useful as it was, in order to move forward with God, they had to realize that it was never designed to take them where they needed to go.

It would never lift the luggage of God's ultimate plan.

So, in order to follow Jesus, they had to leave it behind.

Their veil had to be lifted so they can see as Jesus sees.

Paul says it there in verse 14, "*Only in Christ is the veil taken away.*" And again, in verse 16, "*Whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.*"

Former things can keep us blinded and unable to see what God is up to.

To choose to believe in Jesus means *to choose to see as He sees*.

To see where God is going in our world, we all have to leave behind old ways of thinking, old philosophies, old priorities, old habits, sometimes even old relationships. Sometimes we have to leave behind things that used to work for us, things that made sense to us, things that were comfortable before we knew Jesus. The world's ways of seeing and valuing: those simply have to go.

Anything that keeps us from becoming, and anything that keeps us from helping all those around us to become, people who reflect Jesus' vision and values: we have to set those things aside.

And God's Spirit helps us do that.

Do you remember when you first thought about Jesus and who He is and what He did? Do you remember the moment you first thought, "You know, this Jesus stuff: this makes sense to me!"

Do you know what that was that was affirming that in your heart?

That was God's Spirit drawing you to Himself.

And, you see, He never stops doing that.

Even years and decades into following Jesus, we come to realize new things about God: what He's doing, how He's working. And when those moments come, we're confronted with the choice to believe and move forward, or to deny and stay where we are.

When we choose to believe and follow, it's like another little piece of a veil is removed, and suddenly we can see both God and ourselves more clearly.

³ Romans 5:8

We see and value as Jesus does more perfectly.

That's the work of God's Spirit. He doesn't stop. He keeps on going. As quickly and thoroughly as we'll receive and as we can handle, God's Spirit helps *us* become, and helps us to help others become people and communities that reflect Jesus more and more perfectly.

I wonder if there is some little part of a veil that God's Spirit is pointing out to you, something in your life that's affecting your ability to trust Jesus and to move forward to see as He sees and to value as He values?

Maybe it's something old, something very comfortable to you, but something you know God wants to change for the sake of the glorious world He is re-creating.

For that group in Corinth, it was a huge theological deal with potentially church-wrecking implications.

For you or me, it may not be such a big doctrinal issue, but it can still affect us and the church, just because it's big enough to keep us from following God's vision.

Would you hear God's Spirit as He points out any *good*, but *temporary* thing that needs to go – so that the *best* and *lasting* thing can take its rightful place?

Closing Prayer:

Father, we pray that we'd never be as that group in Corinth who tried to hang on too long to something that

needed to go, so that Your plan of restoration could move forward.

If there is any little place in our lives that a veil still covers, any little place where we can't see as You see, would You point that out here and now? Lift it away, so our plans, our work, our vision for this world would be completely in line with Yours.

Closing Song: *Be Thou My Vision*

Benediction:

Benediction means a good word – a word of good news.

Here's some good news: God's plan is to restore our world – to restore it to the glory it had when He first made it.

Here's another good word: He's already well along in the process. It's happening right now.

And here's still another good word: By the grace of Jesus and the power of His Spirit, God is willing and able to use us – to use "whosoever will" in order to do it.

May we all be of the "*whosoever*" who will – who will see what God sees, and who follow His vision for restoration – for a community and for a world that reflects Jesus.