

2 Corinthians 3 – “The Letter of the Law vs. The Spirit of the Lord”

1. The Challenge of the Law – 3:1-6

3:1 - *Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you?*

Paul again is answering his critics; those that were trying to undermine his ministry and validity as an apostle. And it's not as though Paul was looking to commend himself, or that he did it previously. He's simply having to defend himself against those claiming he was puffing himself up.

- Paul was actually very humble. He would say in 1 Corinthians 15:9 that he was the ***least of the apostles***.

Then 3 years later he would say he's the ***least of all the saints*** (Ephesians 3:8).

Five years after that, he will write in 1 Timothy 1:15 that he is the ***chief of sinners***. Paul grew in humility the older he got. He grew in humility because he grew in grace!

Or do we need... In this day, as people travelled from town to town, you couldn't just call someone for references, so people would carry letters to vouch for the authenticity and integrity of one's ministry (Romans 16:1-2 was a commendation for Phoebe).

- It's like when you apply for a job, you're most likely going to need to provide some references.
- It's what I do with each of you. I call up the churches you came from and get the lowdown on all y'all. It's quite frightening the things I find out 😊.
- We've all probably said at one time or another, *'put in a good word for me.'*

But Paul's question is, *do I need to do this with you?*

3:2-3 - *You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.*

Paul has been in the trenches with these guys at Corinth. He's poured into them and delivered to them the good news of Jesus Christ. Lives were saved and

changed. People just had to look at these converts out of a wicked place like Corinth and recognize that this fruit spoke for itself.

Paul explains that he doesn't need letters to authenticate his ministry, these new creations in Christ at Corinth are his letters that validate Paul's integrity of ministry.

These people have become Paul's letters of authentication. It's not letters written with pen and ink, but written through the Spirit of God, and written upon tablets of flesh. It bypassed tablets of stone that fade in time and become unclear; instead it went right to the heart of people.

- Paul didn't just pass on a cold, hard, tough to digest word; this was the living Word of the living God that brought LIFE!
- Paul's going to go on in the next number of verses to show the inferiority of the law written on stone, versus the new covenant written on the hearts of His people.

God's will and ideal was put on tablets of stone and instead of it penetrating the heart it became hard and misinterpreted. It didn't resemble its original intention. But now this epistle is written on tablets of flesh – the heart. It's a work of the Spirit and not the Law.

2:4-5 - *And we have such trust* [reliance] *through Christ toward God.* ⁵ *Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God,*

Paul knew that changed lives were not his doing. He knows this is a work of Christ. His ***trust is through Christ*** to accomplish this work.

Paul and the other true apostles weren't able to pull this sort of work off by themselves. No amount of freedom sessions, or counseling appointments could do the work that would be done by the Spirit. Paul knew his sufficiency was only ***from God***. He was absolutely dependent on God to carry out the work.

- Paul is answering the question that he left us with in 2:16, '*and who is sufficient for these things?*'. Nobody is sufficient! That's why our sufficiency is from God.

This word sufficiency means capability or qualification. Paul's qualification wasn't from his own ability or training. "The confirmation of his apostleship,

lies not in himself, his powers or resources, but in the effects of his ministry in people, effects which have their origin in Christ (see verse 3).”¹
Are we living with that sort of dependence? Is He our sufficiency?

2:6 - *who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*⁷

Paul isn't taking any credit for the work that's been done and the lives that have been changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's God who has called him and made him **sufficient as ministers of the new covenant**. Paul was given the goods (the good news) and he just had to pass it on. But it was a work of the Spirit that applied that to the hearts of people and changed people.

And it's here that Paul introduces us to the differences between the old and new covenants. He'll really break it down for us in the next section. But as he mentions **the letter**, he's referring to the law, the 10 commandments, the tablets of stone as mentioned earlier (3:3).

Paul wasn't made a minister of the law, but of the Spirit. Because **the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life**.

- Now you might read that and think, *'Wait a second, I thought the law is good?'* And you're right, it is good. The problem was that we weren't. The law provided no ability for people to fulfill it. The law was unable to save us, it only revealed our death sentence.
- "Under the old covenant the people did not have the spiritual resources to keep the law, or any provision for forgiveness when they broke it. The law became a finger of accusation pointed against them. Until the law had been internalized through the Spirit it remained the 'letter', an instrument which 'kills'." ²

The law is an external work. And the law shows who we are externally. It reveals our sin.

Romans 7:7–12, *"What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." ⁸ But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. ⁹ I was alive once without the law,*

¹ Barnett, P. (1988). *The message of 2 Corinthians: power in weakness* (p. 64). InterVarsity Press.

² Barnett, P. (1988). *The message of 2 Corinthians: power in weakness* (p. 65). InterVarsity Press.

but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. ¹⁰ And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. ¹¹ For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. ¹² Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good."

- The law was given to reveal our sin and our need for a Saviour. The law is to point us to Christ and to the life He gives us through His Spirit.

Now some have liked to interpret this verse to say that we aren't to be fundamentalists of the Word, which they would say is the letter. Instead we just need to be open to the Spirit and to experience.

But this is not what Paul is saying at all. He's simply showing the superiority of the new covenant verses the old covenant.

- We are never to neglect the Word in favor of experience. Rather it's the Spirit that leads us in the Word (John 6:63, 68).

2. The Glory of the Old vs the Glory of the New – 3:7-11

3:7-8 - *But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, ⁸ how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?*

Again, the old covenant was indeed glorious. So much so that when Moses received it and spent that time with God on the mountain, he came back down with those two tablets and his face was glowing (Exodus 34:29). The people were even afraid to come near him. But that glory that was shining on Moses was temporary. It faded, just like my Christmas tan from the Dominican Republic. It's not lasting!

- That's how it is with the law and trying to live by the law. You might shine for a time, but it will fade. Some days you're going to be a glow because you feel like you've been keeping it well. You haven't taken the Lord's name in vain, you haven't murdered anyone, you haven't stolen anything. I mean, you probably haven't left your house for a few days, but you're feeling good nonetheless. But then comes a time you covet, or you haven't honored mom and dad, and suddenly you feel pretty lousy. The shine has lost its luster. But the reality all along is that the law, no matter how good it is, could never make you good.

Paul's point is: if that law is glorious, how much more is the ministry and work of the Spirit? Let's see why...

3:9 - **For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory.**

Notice how the law is referred to – the **ministry of condemnation**. How does that sound? Not the kind of ministry you want to be a part of. Could you imagine announcing that at church as a new ministry starting?

But even this had glory because it was of God. The law, though it condemned, it showed God's perfect standard of righteousness. It condemned because we were unable to live up to it.

- The Bible says that if we break just one part of it, it's as though we're guilty of breaking it all (James 2:10).

So, the law is no way to live in peace and in the life that God has for us.

Whereas the ministry of the Spirit exceeds in glory because it's a ministry of righteousness.

- You see the law could never make us right with God. The system of sacrifices within the law covered our sin, but they could never remove it. Jesus now comes as our righteousness. He died as our final sacrifice that doesn't just cover our sins but removes it and replaces it with His righteousness. That is glorious!!

And God spoke of this even in the Old Testament:

Ezekiel 36:26–27, *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them."*

Jeremiah 31:31–34, *"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—³² not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ³⁴ No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."*

- This terminology Paul has been using in this chapter of stone vs. the heart is from these passages.

We have this amazing blessing of coming into new life in Christ, and experiencing the glory of new life through the Spirit that imparts to us Christ's righteousness and enables us to live righteously. Absolutely glorious!

- **Romans 8:1–4**, *"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. ³ For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."*

3:10-11 - *For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. ¹¹ For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.*

The glory of the New Covenant far exceeded the glory of the Old Covenant that is seemed as though the Old Covenant had no glory.

- "A. T. Robertson states, "The greater glory dims the less. In one point at least, the old seems to have no glory at all, because of the superabundant glory of the new covenant."¹² Denney comments: "When the Sun shines in His strength, there is no other glory in the sky."^{13 3}

Here's also why the New Covenant is much more glorious, because it is permanent. The Old Covenant is referred to that which is passing away, but the New as that which remains.

3. The Transformation of the Spirit – 3:12-18

3:12-13 - *Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech—¹³ unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away.*

No longer do we need to strive to attain to something that we are unable to. There's no hope in that! So Paul speaks confidently of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

¹² Robertson, *Ministry*, p. 70.

¹³ Denney, *Second Corinthians*, p. 123.

³ MacDonald, W. (1995). *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments* (A. Farstad, Ed.; p. 1830). Thomas Nelson.

- **Romans 1:16**, *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek."*

Paul brings up the reason Moses put on a veil. It wasn't to prevent the Israelites from seeing the glory shining from his face, it was to prevent them from seeing the fading of the glory. The law had its place, but it wasn't to remain as the way to earn a right standing with God. We're moving from glory to glory.

- F. W. Grant has beautifully stated, "The glory on the face of Moses must give way to the glory in Another Face."¹⁴ ⁴

3:14-15 - *But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. ¹⁵ But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart.*

Even to this day, to the Jews, the veil remains. They are still trusting in their good works to outweigh their bad works, thinking salvation is about keeping the law. The Bible says that they are blinded in part (Romans 11:25). They have not, for the most part, seen that the law has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. A veil still sits on their hearts.

3:16 - *Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.*

What joy it is to see a Jew that has the veil removed. They begin to see that everything they have been studying in the Old Testament all points to Jesus and is fulfilled in Jesus!

Everything they've been observing and celebrating (ie. Passover) is all wrapped up in Jesus. It's like the blind being able to see. Everything is seen through fresh eyes and a new perspective.

- This happens individually, and there is coming a time it will happen nationally for Israel (Romans 11:25-26).

3:17 - *Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.*

Praise the Lord that in Jesus, we experience great liberty and freedom. We're no longer working to earn our salvation; we're not under condemnation. We're free!

¹⁴ F. W. Grant, "2 Corinthians," *The Numerical Bible*, VI:547.

⁴ MacDonald, W. (1995). *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments* (A. Farstad, Ed.; p. 1830). Thomas Nelson.

Now some have used this verse to claim that when the Spirit is at work, or active in your midst as you gather, you can just throw aside restraint. The Spirit brings freedom. If you want to run around and cluck like a chicken, or shake rattle and roll, then go for it, there's liberty. This is what some will teach and claim this verse is saying. But remember the context. Paul is referring to the Old Covenant. We're no longer under the law! We're free, we have liberty in Christ, not to do what we want, but to live in His power and grace. *Galatians 5:1

3:18 - *But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.*

Praise the Lord that we're not veiled from seeing the glory of the Lord! But how do we see this glory more? By spending time with Jesus. James likens the Word to looking into a mirror. Not only does it reveal our own dirt, it reveals the Lord's brilliance! And as we spend time with Jesus in Bible study, in prayer, in fellowship, something dynamic happens – we become transformed into the same image of this brilliance and glory of the Lord. Look to Jesus and you'll never be the same.

- This transformation speaks of a metamorphosis (that's the word Paul uses). The ugly caterpillar becoming a beautiful butterfly. But notice, it's ***by the Spirit of the Lord***. How many would love to change? I'm sure most of us would. And how many times do we try with all our might to change? Not gonna happen unless the Lord by His Spirit does the work. *Romans 12:2

Summary of Contrasts Between the Old and New Covenants

1. Economy	Old	New	3:6
2. Type	Letter	Spirit	3:6
3. Result manward	Death	Life	3:6
4. Vehicle	Stone	Spirit	3:7
5. Result Godward	Some Glory	Greater Glory	3:7, 8, 10
6. Purpose	Condemnation	Righteousness	3:9
7. Duration	Temporary	Permanent	3:11
8. Symbol	Veil	Mirror	3:13-18
9. Initiator	Moses	Christ	3:12-14 ⁵

⁵ <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/2corinthians/2corinthians.htm>