**WE REFLECT THE LORD’S GLORY**

November 16, 2014

2 Corinthians 3:1-18

Key Verse 3:18 “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory.”

Last week we learned that we are the aroma of Christ. God cares about the smell. Today, we see that God cares about our appearances. The Bible compares sin to leprosy. Leprosy disfigures body and makes it so ugly until lepers lose their noses and fingers. Likewise, sin disfigures God’s image in us and make it ugly. One who should look like a heavenly prince looks like a demoniac. One who should look like a heavenly princess looks like a prostitute. If they clean and put a lot of makeup, they may look good temporarily. But soon they become ugly again. The old covenant was like that. It gave a temporary glory. But in the new covenant, God heals our inner man and cleanses us within and transforms us so that we may look like heavenly princes and princesses. Because God gave us his Spirit in us, he is transforming us into his likeness with ever-increasing glory. We reflect the Lord’s glory.

Look at verse 1. “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?” With these words Paul touched a problem in his relationship to the Corinthians. They had been influenced by false apostles who emphasized letters of recommendation as proof of valid apostleship. These false teachers disparaged Paul for not having such letters, planting doubt about his integrity and message. To help the Corinthians, Paul produced the best recommendation letter. Look at verse 3. “You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” It was self-evident and undeniable that the Corinthians were a letter from Christ. The Holy Spirit had forgiven their sins, and transformed their lives, printing the image of Christ on them. Only Christ could do this. It happened through Paul's ministry. A letter from Christ is superior to any human letter. Human letters of recommendation can be helpful in entering a university, getting a good job, and so on. To help foreign delegates obtain U.S. visas to attend the international summer Bible conference, we needed letters from senators. These really worked. However, these letters are temporal; after new senators are elected, they will be useless.

Some people think that to do the work of God we need a certificate from a seminary, and that without this we can do nothing. However, Paul put no confidence in these things (Php 3:4-6). All that mattered to Paul was that the Holy Spirit had worked through faith in Christ Jesus. To Paul, that was the one and only criteria that validated God’s servants. In Christian history many seemingly uneducated people, like Jesus’ apostles, were used greatly by God through their faith in Christ. D.L. Moody, one of the greatest evangelists, was a shoe salesman and did not have formal seminary training, but he preached the gospel to millions leading 100,000s to Christ. Moody’s grammar was not very good and he often mispronounced words, and people would laugh at him. But Moody just relied on the Lord to help him make sense. After one of his messages, a seminary student said to him, “Mr. Moody, I counted 18 grammatical errors in the first 5 minutes of your message.” Moody responded, “Young man, I am using all the grammar I got for God’s Glory. What are you doing with yours?” Such confidence came from God.

Look at verse 4. “Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God.” Paul’s confidence was not relative, but absolute. It was different from confidence in human authority. Paul’s confidence was unshakable, as God is unshakable. This kind of confidence was necessary for Paul, for it enabled him to endure challenges. God gives us this kind of confidence. Look at verse 5. “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.” The word “competence” is also translated as “sufficient” (KJV), “adequate” (NAS), or “capable” (TEV). God gives us everything we need to do his work. It is not inherent; it is given by God. So it is not only a few special people who can do God’s work. Whoever trusts in God can be made competent by God to be a gospel worker. We need such confidence. Many times, we feel inadequate; We are not good speakers. We are not pretty as some actresses. We are not smart like Einstein. So we feel like we cannot do anything glorious with our lives. When you recognize your inability and your insufficiency, that is a good thing because you learn to lean upon God for his strength. God is the all sufficient one who makes up for all of our weaknesses, flaws and failures. 2 Peter 1:3 also says, “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his glory and goodness.” Even Moody was able to preach the gospel to millions of people with poor English.

Look a verse 6. “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant--not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” Paul says that God has made “us”--all believers--competent as ministers of a new covenant. In Greek there are two words for “new.” One is neos, which means “new in point of time.” (such as a new baby.) The second Greek word for “new” is kainos, which means not only “new in point of time, but also new in quality.”
Paul used kainos when speaking of the new covenant. Therefore we need to understand that the new covenant is not only new in point of time, but that it is quite different in kind from the old covenant. The new covenant produces a totally different kind of relationship between God and us. First of all, let’s make it clear. In making the contrasts between the old and new covenants, Paul did not deny the glory of the old covenant, because there was glory in the giving of the Law. What Paul affirmed, however, was that the glory of the new covenant was far superior to the glory of the old covenant.

**First**, the new covenant glory means life, not death. Look at verses 6-8: “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. 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, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?” Here “the letter” refers to God’s law. When Paul says, “the letter kills,” it is an abbreviated explanation of the law. The law, given by God, is sacred, holy and righteous. The problem is that man is weak and cannot keep the law with his own strength. The law only exposes sin; it cannot save man from sin. Rather, the law judges sin and brings the death sentence. St. Paul struggled to keep the law. But he could not keep the 10th commandment, “Do not covet.” The more he tried to obey, the more he felt condemned. The power of sin made Paul unable to do good, though he had the desire to do so. The power of sin made him a slave of sin. He cried out, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” In such a desperate moment he looked at Jesus who was hung on the cross for our sins. Then he shouted, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” In Romans 8:1-2 he says: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.” When we accept Jesus as our Savior, we cross over from the power of sin and death into the power of the Spirit of life. When we are in Christ Jesus the power of the Spirit of life sets us free from the power of sin and death, and we receive a new life.

**Second**, the new covenant glory is permanent, not temporary. Look at verse 11: “And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!” The ministry of the old covenant was glorious. It taught Israelite slaves the law of God so that they may overcome their slave mentality, and become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But the glory of the old covenant was fading in Paul’s day, and today that glory is found only in the pages of the Old Testament. Paul’s point is that the glory of the new covenant is so much greater because it will never fade away. Look at verses 13. When Moses came down from meeting God on the mountain, his face shone with God’s glory, but then Moses covered his face with a veil so that the people would not be able to see the slow fading of the glory that was once there.

But the glory of the new covenant never fades away because God put it in our hearts. Jeremiah 31:31-34 say, “I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel...I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts...For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” The new covenant became effective when Jesus died on the cross. At the Last Supper, Jesus said, “This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Mt 26:28) In the old covenant man’s sin was forgiven through the shedding of animal blood. This provision was temporary and incomplete. The Israelites had to offer sacrifices again and again, whenever they sinned. The new covenant is not based on animal’s blood, but on the blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. The blood of Jesus Christ was holy and sinless. So it can bring complete and eternal forgiveness once for all (Heb 9:12). When we come to God by faith, God forgives our terrible sins and purifies us through Jesus’ blood (1 Jn 1:9). God put his Spirit in us and is restoring God’s holy image in us little by little.

This idea of the veil that Moses wore took hold of Paul’s mind and he then applied it to an ongoing blindness of the Jews. Look at verses 14,15. “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. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.”
Paul had a special love for Israel and a burden to see his people saved. But Paul knew that this was no easy task because there was a spiritual “veil” over their minds and hearts. Even though the Old Testament scriptures were read systematically in their synagogues, the Jewish people did not grasp the spiritual message God had given them. The very Scripture that ought to point them to Jesus as the Messiah was not able to do so because of the veil.

Was there any hope for the lost children of Israel? Paul said there was. Look at verses 16,17, “But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” Only in Christ is the veil removed. Whenever a person does turn to the Lord, the veil is removed because they see in Christ the fulfillment of the law. And not only is the veil removed, but the bondage of the law is removed and the Spirit introduces life and freedom. There is freedom from fear. There is freedom from condemnation. There is freedom from feeling inadequate. There is freedom to look at God without veil.

Look at verse 18. “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” This verse is the climax of the chapter and presents truth that is so exciting and marvelous. It declares that all of us Christians are privileged to share in possessing and radiating the glory of the Lord through the work of the Holy Spirit. Under the old covenant, only Moses ascended the mountain and had fellowship with God; but under the new covenant, all believers have the privilege of communion with the Lord. We are participants in the glory of God and are transformed into his likeness by the Spirit. As we look into God’s Word and see God’s Son, the Spirit transforms us into the very likeness of God. The goal of new covenant ministry is transformation into the image of Jesus Christ. The Law brought us to Christ, but only new covenant grace can make us like Christ. This caused Paul to declare: “Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.” (2 Cor. 4:1) When we understand that our lives and ministries involve the glory of God, how could we quit or give up hope?

“We reflect the Lord’s glory,” is also translated as, “We mirror the glory of the Lord.” With unveiled faces we are looking as in a mirror, catch the light and reflect the glory of the Lord. We reflect as a mirror does and we do it with unveiled faces. As believers, we have a clear view of our Savior with an open face. Have you looked into his lovely face and seen a clear view of Jesus? Paul is not referring to a passing momentary glance. He is talking about gazing upon him. We steadfastly look into the face of Jesus and reflect the glory of his face like a mirror reflecting light, and at the same time are continuously being transformed into the same image of Christ. We are being conformed to the image of Christ as we contemplate the glory of God on the face of Jesus. A mirror reflects only what it sees. We all reflect as in a mirror. What are we reflecting? Are there any veils getting in the way?

Look at verse 18 again. “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” In contrast to Moses’ fading glory, we have ever-increasing glory. We are being made more like Jesus every day. When Jesus comes again, we will be like Jesus: imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual. What a glorious hope we have!

God forgave all our sins and made us ministers of the new covenant through Jesus. We are not qualified in ourselves, but we became ministers of the new covenant by the grace of God. This ministry gives life to perishing souls. This ministry forgives condemned sinners and makes them right with God. So our ministry is the most glorious work in the world, more glorious than any other. We should be proud of this as ministers of the new covenant and we must be bold in carrying out this life-giving work.