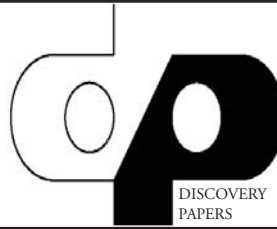


A VEIL

**SERIES: IDENTITY CHECK:
LESSONS IN AUTHENTIC FAITH**



Catalog No. 4944
2 Corinthians 3:7-18
3rd Message
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The core belief held in human hearts around the world and throughout the ages can be summed up in the familiar saying, “God helps those who help themselves.” It’s an attractive religious notion for a number of reasons. God and human beings each play an important role. This perspective does not even require a personal God. It’s easily transferable to God as you understand him (or her, or it), or to the programs of politicians, or the vision statements of universities and corporations. It dovetails easily with the patriotic version of every nation’s history, with commonly told children’s stories, and the belief in the moral authority of science and technological progress. God, or the indomitable spirit of human striving, helps those who help themselves. If you look in your own heart, you’ll realize this belief has been there all your life. Good things should happen (with divine approval) to those who do their part.

The text of Scripture that we’re working our way through in this series, 2 Corinthians 2-5, directly contradicts this old, familiar belief with what is called the new covenant; a new arrangement; a new way of thinking and living. At the end of the text we considered in the last message (Discovery Paper 4943) were these words: “Our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:5b-6).

We need to distinguish between the old, natural way of doing our best, and the new way of life in the Spirit.

A lesser glory

2 Corinthians 3:7-11:

⁷But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, ⁸how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be with even more glory? ⁹For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory.

¹⁰For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it.

¹¹For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.

The most impressive example of living by the old arrangement, or the old covenant, is found in Israel’s history. They based their efforts on religious law that God, Himself, revealed to Moses. If anyone could succeed in this effort, it would be them. Previously, in verse 3, we read of writing on tablets of stone and on human hearts. The writing on stone tablets was, of course, the Ten Commandments, given on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34). Now we encounter more of that story with instruction in what makes the new covenant different from the old.

It is clear that the old covenant, human effort to achieve personal reform, has a degree of glory to it. Trying hard is better than being cynical, and better than despairing or giving up. If someone gives you a stirring challenge to improve yourself, you may well benefit, at least for a time. We urge our children to do their best, hold them to high standards, encourage them to have positive goals. Often good outcomes result—“Letters engraved on stones... came with glory.”

Eventually the good achieved will fail to accomplish what we hoped for most deeply in our hearts. It is not good enough and is intended by God to be replaced by something greater: “For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory” (v.9).

Note also that the old covenant results in condemnation. This is not a reference to damnation. Paul is talking about self-condemnation. Given a great opportunity, you rise to the challenge and do your best in the hope that God will reward you for it. Surely he helps those who help themselves. But when you’ve done your best and there’s still failure, and hoped for change doesn’t last, what conclusion should be drawn? In the long run, self-effort will always bring us to condemnation, because we will always come to the end of what we can do, and then have only ourselves to blame.

Third, he says in verse 11 that the glory of the old covenant is something that fades away. The greater glory belongs to things that last forever. Think of an accomplishment that you are proud of, something you worked hard on and were recognized for. How long did its effects last, and how much good did it do you? Most of the best things we've ever done eventually stop meeting our needs. They recede into the past. They are supplanted by somebody else's accomplishments.

I was at a high-school football game not long ago, and it reminded me of a football game that I participated in when I was in high-school many, many years ago. In it I gave what I'm sure was one of the greatest speeches that's ever been given by a high-school football player. I was captain of the team, standing in a defensive huddle. Our backs were up against the goal line. In my stirring speech I said something like, "They will not get through! We are going to stop them! They will not score!" And we succeeded! Our offense came onto the field with the crowd cheering. But it was the middle of the third quarter, in the sixth game of the season, and the moment passed. Our accomplishment receded into the background. It didn't matter very much the next day, and certainly by the next week nobody cared. It was glorious, but it faded.

If "God helps those who help themselves" is inadequate, what are we left with? Well, one alternative is to cry out for help, to admit the problem. But most of us choose an intermediate step, and that is to lie. We don't want to admit that our lives are not working, so we cover up the inadequacy, the self-condemnation, the fading nature of our best efforts. If we can't convince ourselves, at least we want to convince everybody else. We want others to think better of us than we know is true. Paul goes back again to the story of the giving of the Law and comments on Moses' use of a veil.

The problem of pretense

2 Corinthians 3:12-15:

¹²Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech, ¹³and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away. ¹⁴But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in

Christ. ¹⁵But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart.

Moses went up on the mountain to meet with God and to be given good laws. The people were waiting for him when he came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments written on the stone tablets. But Moses had been in God's direct presence so long that a powerful brightness emanated from his face. So he did something thoughtful: he put a veil over his face so that he wouldn't make the people uncomfortable when they were with him. I don't know what this veil really looked like, but I think of it as a veil on a beekeeper's hat. He could see out and talk with people, but the brightness of his face was hidden.

Over time the shininess of Moses' face surely faded. Eventually he would have gone back to having his old very ordinary, not too impressive face. But Moses kept the veil on. He didn't want the Israelites to know that the brightness had dimmed, that he wasn't any more spiritually impressive-looking than anybody else.

Paul is making very important observations on this score. Everybody I know who has tried to live in God's name and for His sake, or has tried to live for any other valuable purpose, has had to deal with the problem of pretense. Let me point out a couple things in this text.

First, boldness is the opposite of pretense. In verses 12-13 Paul says, "We use great boldness in our speech, and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face" If we are going to live lives of boldness, verve, enterprise, and joy then we can't also be liars, covering up. It takes too much trouble to keep a facade in place, doesn't it? Once we start pretending, then we have to gather other kinds of lies around us, and keeping the fiction going takes all of our effort. Pretense destroys bold faith.

He says farther on in verse 17, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." Liberty and boldness go together. People who are veiled can be pushy and blustery. But real boldness is not pushy, demanding, or aggressive. It comes from a core of self-acceptance and freedom, and it's made alive by joy.

I'm convinced that part of the fiction for Moses would have been a sense that the children of Israel were counting on him. What if they found out that he was ordinary, that nothing special remained? Would they listen to him? Could he lead them? He was pretending because he didn't want these people who trusted him and were counting on him to have their hopes dashed. I've seen myself make

choices that are roughly like that. “I’d like to be an honest person, but I’m thinking of these poor folks who depend on me, and I’m keeping up this appearance for them.” Responsibility for others can add a layer of deception—the veil is not to protect myself, but because of the needs of others. The result is a tendency to play it safe. Predictability limits the likelihood of exposure.

Another thing Paul says is that Moses’ behavior with the veil ultimately led to hardness of heart in the people, an impenetrable curtain over their hearts. Veiled lives begin well: you think that you can see out and no one can see you, and that feels like a pretty good arrangement. But eventually a hardening occurs. Prayer grows stale. You study the Scriptures and you see only the same thing you’ve seen before. There’s no freshness. That’s the result of pretense. If we’re veiling ourselves and not telling the truth, eventually we can’t receive anything more from God. Spontaneous generosity, breakthroughs in worship, and insight into the word of God all become less and less likely.

There are four categories of experience in which we would do well to ask ourselves some questions. These are places where Christian phoniness most readily finds a home. One is relationships that are unhealthy, especially in families. We want people to believe the best of our family, our marriage, and our children. Even though love is fading, we cover it up. Another category is addictions, especially those that can be hidden, engaged in at a distance from others or in the dark. Doubts are another. Christians aren’t supposed to have doubts about the core elements of their faith, so we have to hide the fact that we are really struggling to believe. Trust is fading, and it’s being covered up. Finally, there is fear. Perhaps we’re desperately afraid, but we don’t want anybody to know that, so we smile harder and act tougher. So Moses’ veil is the last attempt to keep the old, familiar, natural, and universal way of life in place (“God helps those who help themselves”). We know it’s not working, but we’re going to pretend it is.

Let me make a distinction before we move on. Perhaps your life is a ping-pong ball; one day you’re one kind of person, another day you’re another kind. You don’t know how to stop, and you acknowledge the struggle. That’s not what we’re talking about here. This text is talking about deceit. Moses knew very well that his face wasn’t shining anymore and there was no reason to be wearing a veil, but he wore it anyway.

So if we’re at the end of our rope, condemned by our best efforts, and protecting a lie, what do we do?

Turning to the Lord

2 Corinthians 3:16-18:

¹⁶But whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. ¹⁸But 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 from the Lord, the Spirit.

Let me first observe what is not offered here as a solution: indiscriminate confession. You may have been in a Christian group, as I have, where somebody will finally declare, “We’re a bunch of religious phonies. Every one of us here is dishonest, and we’ve got to be different!” In an outpouring of emotions, people spill their guts. Confessions that are driven by emotions have only limited value. Some folks become experts at emotionally wrenching, gut-spilling speeches and still remain hidden behind a mask.

Paul is not calling for people to get together in groups and do their best to be radically honest. What he says is, “Turn to the Lord.” The point is, if you’re covering up fear, who’s going to be able to help you with what you’re afraid of? If you just tear off the mask and admit, “I’m terrified,” eventually you’re going to have to put it back on. The solution is to turn to the One who can actually replace fear with peace. If you’re doubting your faith, the admission of doubt alone doesn’t help. If your love is fading, you need Someone who can supply love to you. We need to turn to the One who can actually deal with the issues that are making us want to hide in the first place. “Whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.”

How do you turn to the Lord? What does it mean to behold the Lord? Well, there are familiar and ancient ways. One is making it a priority to engage in prayer that is genuine, in which you actively enter God’s presence and listen and expect something to happen. Another is reading the Scriptures with the intention of meeting God instead of just getting informed. A third is worship, as we do when we gather together, and also sometimes alone, actively adoring God and lowering ourselves before Him. Finally, service is a way to turn to the Lord, to behold Him, as we stop living in a world that’s bound by us and give ourselves to someone else, with Christ in the midst of it. Turning to the Lord is making choices to let Him speak to us, to see Him as He is, to turn away from the chatter of our own concerns.

Finally, Paul says we are “beholding as in a mirror the

glory of the Lord.” Most commentators say that phrase means that we can’t observe God directly, in the same way that we can’t stare at the sun. We can see the glory of God only when it’s reflected or filtered. But I believe there’s another way to understand this phrase “beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord.” When you look in a mirror, perhaps when shaving or putting on makeup, what you see is your own face. One place to “behold” Christ is to see Him in yourself, to acknowledge that God is doing a good thing in you, to realize that you have changed, and you’re not who you used to be.

Let the Lord look out through your eyes, trusting that He resides in you now and your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). You are in the process of changing over time (“from glory to glory”) and you don’t have to be forlorn, frightened, and self-condemning. You can give God credit for the real work He has done in you, and rejoice in the fact that what He began, He will complete (Philippians 1:6). Part of the invitation to turn to the Lord, to behold Him, to be given freedom to remove veils, may be thankfulness that He has made you different than you were because you are the object of His love.

2 Corinthians 3:16-18:

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