



NOTHING TO HIDE

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2 Corinthians 3:12-18
Fourth Message
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The movie, "Playing For Time," portrayed the story of Fanla Fenelon, a member of an orchestra of Jewish women who were spared the gas chambers at Auschwitz so long as they played well. The lives of these women were reduced to a single proposition: do well or die.

Many of us have lived much of our Christian lives thinking that God has given us a difficult instrument to play; that he is watching our every move, listening to every sound, waiting for us to hit a sour note. We think our lives are reduced to that single proposition: do well or die. But it isn't true! Despite the miscues and the dissonant chords of our lives, the untuned and the untunable nature of them, Jesus loves us, "this we know, for the Bible tells us so." This is what we are learning in our studies in the new covenant.

In his book *What's So Amazing About Grace*, Phil Yancey recalls the story Jesus told about the laborers who were hired to work in a vineyard. Some of these men clocked in at sunrise, some at morning coffee break, some at lunch time, some during the afternoon coffee break, and some an hour before quitting time. Everyone seemed content until pay time came; then the stalwarts who had worked twelve hours under a blazing sun learned that the sweatless upstarts, who had put in barely an hour's work, would get exactly the same pay as they had received.

The employer's action in this parable flies in the face of everything we know about employee motivation and fair compensation. It's not good economics; it doesn't seem fair. We'd like to change the story. In fact, in a contemporary Jewish version, the workers hired late in the afternoon are said to have worked so hard that the employer, impressed by their efforts, awarded them a full day's wages. But in Jesus' version in the gospel of Matthew, our Lord notes that the last group of workers had been standing around idly in the market place—something that only lazy types would do during harvest season. What employer in his right mind would pay the same amount for one hour's work as for twelve?

Yancey concludes, "Jesus' story was not meant to make economic sense, however. It's a parable about grace, which, unlike a day's wage, can't be calculated. Grace isn't about finishing last or first. It's about not counting. We receive grace as a gift from God. We don't work to earn it." That is what Jesus said so clearly in the employer's response to those who were upset, "*Friend, I*

am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

My problem when I read that parable, and others like it, is that I identify with the employee who put in a full day's work rather than the add-ons at the end of the day. Consequently I miss the point, which is that God dispenses gifts, not wages. None of us gets paid according to merit, because none of us comes close to satisfying God's requirements for a perfect life. If we were to be paid on the basis of fairness we would end up in hell. In the words of Robert Farrar Capon, "If the world could have been saved by good bookkeeping, it would have been saved by Moses, not Jesus." As Yancey puts it, "Grace cannot be reduced to generally accepted accounting principles. To our way of thinking, some workers deserve more than others. In the realm of grace, however, the word 'deserve' doesn't apply."

The good news of the gospel of grace is the theme of our study as we continue to unfold Paul's revelation of the new covenant, from the third chapter of his second letter to the Corinthians. The apostle has been contrasting the old and new covenants, two arrangements for living. This morning we pick up his words in verse 12 of chapter 3.

Having therefore such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech, (2 Cor 3:12, NASB)

When we understand the new covenant we experience the most liberating secret in the word of God. Paul put it this way in Colossians, "*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*" Unlike the fading glory of trying to please God in our own strength, Paul says he found something even more exciting: a new arrangement for living, provided by God in Christ, a new, renewed covenant that gives us a right relationship with our Creator from the beginning, rather than having to earn it. Not only that, but we can expect God to work with us and through us so that when we do the ordinary, everyday things, he will be at work, accomplishing his purposes.

Now that is exciting! With that kind of hope, says Paul, he can be very bold. By boldness, he means transparency, honesty, and forthrightness. We aren't hiding or playing games. With this understanding of the new covenant, Paul is more confident than he has ever been. He can be right out front, with nothing to hide and

nothing to prove. Because he is not counting on himself but on God, he has a positive, confident outlook on life.

He goes on to contrast this confidence with Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites would not see the “glory that was fading away.” Verse 13:

and are not as Moses, who used to put a veil over his face that the sons of Israel might not look intently at the end of what was fading away. (3:13)

Paul takes us back to Exodus chapter 34, using Moses as an example once more. Moses spent forty days on Mt. Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments and the spelling out of the law. When he came back down the mountain, his face radiated the glory of God from being in God’s presence, so that he had to cover his face with a veil because the rays were so strong. There was nothing wrong with that, but after a while the glory faded away to a dim glow. Moses continued wearing the veil, however. He didn’t want the people to see that the glory had faded away. Ostensibly he wore it to prevent their being blinded by the glow, but the fact is, he kept it on because he wanted to look good. Paul figured out what was really going on. Moses was trying to preserve his reputation with the people. He didn’t want them to see that this mark of his privilege and status before God was fading. So Moses did what millions have done since: he hid his fading glory behind a facade, a veil.

That fading glory is a picture of the old covenant, of trying our best to keep the law. That is what the law does. It has an initial glory, it puts forth an appeal to righteousness, so we resolve to do our best to obey it. And we look good for a while, because the flesh can maintain the effort for a few hours or days, even a few weeks. But then the glory fades. We collapse internally and we begin to act in an ungodly way at home. Usually that is the first sign of collapse—the way we act toward our spouses and our children. Nobody else sees that behavior, of course. So we keep the veil on because we have to look good in public.

The veil over Moses’ face is a symbol of whatever interferes with and delays the work of the law in our lives. Paul has been saying that the law has come to kill us, to show to us how completely futile it is for us to try to obey God, but a veil delays that. It makes us think we really are pleasing God, that we are fulfilling his demands. The veil, therefore, puts off the death that we need to experience in order to receive the life that God is willing to give us.

Many years ago, John Fischer wrote a song that humorously captured the tendency of evangelical Christians to wear veils. He called it *Evangelical Veil Productions*. Listen to the lyrics:

Evangelical Veil Productions
Pick one up at quite a reduction;
Got all kinds of shapes and sizes;
Introductory bonus prizes!

Special quality, one-way see through;
You can see them but they can’t see you.
Never have to show yourself again!

Just released—a Moses model;
Comes with shine in a plastic bottle,
It makes you look like you’ve just seen the Lord!

Just one daily application
And you’ll fool the congregation,
Guaranteed to last a whole week through.

Got a Back-from-the-Summer-Camp veil,
With a Mountain-top look that’ll never fail,
As long as you renew it every year.

Lots of special Jesus freak files,
every one comes with a permanent smile,
One-way button, and a sticker for your car.

Paul contrasts his own confidence with Moses’ fear. Moses wore his veil because he was afraid, so he hid something that should have been seen. Paul goes on to link this with the action of Israel, of the Jews of his own time, and their unbelief. Verse 14:

But 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. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. (3:14-16)

Here Paul changes the metaphor. Moses wore the veil so that the Israelites wouldn’t see that the glory was fading away. Now the law was here and the veil was hanging over the face of the sons of Israel so that they didn’t see that the law has that quality of a fading glory. They didn’t see that the end of all their efforts to try to live righteously in their own strength was going to end in death, condemnation, emptiness, and a sense of futility.

When Moses brought the Ten Commandments down from the mountain and read them to the people, their immediate response was, “All that God says, we will do.” The confidence and pride of the flesh rose up and said, “God, we’ve got what it takes to do everything you say. Don’t worry about us. We are your faithful people. Whatever you say, we will do.” But before the day was over they had broken all ten of the commandments. Ray Stedman commented, “They knew it, but they didn’t want anyone else to know it, so they put up a facade. They covered over their failure with religious ritual and convinced themselves that was all God wanted. The pride which would not admit failure was the veil that hid the end of the fading glory.”

Fifteen hundred years after Moses, Paul found the same veil at work in Israel.

Obviously, the veil on Moses’ face was a material thing, made of cloth. Paul is not saying that the Jews

wore cloth veils on their faces, however. He is saying that what that veil stood for with Moses was the same problem with the Israelites of his own day. That veil concealed the end of the fading glory. It hid the terrible end of self-effort and the death that resulted from that. The Israelites failed to see that the result of all their efforts to live righteously was death, condemnation and emptiness, and a total sense of futility and waste. But yet, that is what happened.

Paul calls this a "hardening." It became a continual condition, a state of mind they entered into. Amazingly, in our day, two thousand years after Paul, this is still true. In Orthodox Judaism today, in much of Reformed Judaism and certainly in Liberal Judaism, Jews are still trying to make it before God on the basis of how they behave. But this is not limited to Judaism. Paul isn't attacking Judaism. He is simply using Moses and Israel as an illustration of something that was happening in the church.

There were believers in Corinth who had a veil over their minds. And there are believers all over the world who do the same today. As Ray Stedman put it, "They still believe that if they try hard enough they can keep themselves from evil and thus live in a way that is pleasing to God." They can accomplish something good if they just give it the old college try, they think. This is the error that paralyzes believers and entire churches today and makes them lives of weakness and futility. But the good news is that we can stop lying to ourselves. The sweet sound of amazing grace saves us from self deception, from denying that though Christ was victorious, the battle with lust, greed, materialism, and pride still rages inside us. We can acknowledge that we are unloving, irritable, angry, and resentful. When we go to church we can leave our white hats at home. We don't need to apply spiritual cosmetics to make us more presentable to God or to anyone else.

In *What's So Amazing About Grace*, Yancey refers to a contrast which Eugene Peterson draws between Augustine and Pelagius, two fourth century theological opponents. Pelagius was urbane, courteous, convincing, and liked by everyone. Augustine squandered away his youth in immorality, had a strange relationship with his mother, and made many enemies. Yet Augustine started from God's grace and got it right, whereas Pelagius started from human effort and got it wrong. Augustine passionately pursued God; Pelagius methodically worked to please God. Peterson concludes that Christians tend to be Augustinian in theory but Pelagian in practice. They work obsessively to please other people and even God.

The veil still remains over our hearts. It comes in different forms, but its essence remains the same. It represents some image or front that we project to others to hide our real selves, because we don't want anyone to see the fading glory. The danger is that if we wear our veils long enough, we actually begin to believe we are

the kind of people we want others to think we are.

But there is a way of achieving a righteousness that doesn't fade away, one that isn't merely external and temporal. When people turn to the Lord, the veil is taken away. In the presence of the Lord there is no need to play games, no need to hide and be hypocritical anymore. We can be honest. That is what Paul says. Verse 17:

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

Paul is simply clarifying terms here. Freedom is being out in the open, having the boldness that comes with knowing we have nothing to hide. Someone who is free has no reputation to defend and no image to hide behind, so he can be himself. The way to freedom is to not fear looking at the evil in your heart and life, because you have another basis on which you can receive the acceptance and approval of God: it is a gift to you.

Paul gives the process. Verse 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 from the Lord, the Spirit. (3:18)

The NASB uses five words to translate one Greek word. The phrase, "*beholding as in a mirror,*" is actually one word that literally means, "to look at something intently, to scrutinize something." The process of true change is simply one of looking at the face of Jesus, getting to know him, worshipping him and loving him. If you are having trouble with God and have a confused understanding about him, for whatever reason, my advice to you is, read the gospels. If you want to know what God looks like, look at Jesus. Look at how he lived his life, and what he said, because he is, as Paul put it, "the perfect expression of God."

So our task is simply to reveal Christ to people, to let them know who he is and what he is like. We do that by teaching the Word. This is where his beauty is expressed. I think the process is similar to one we know well. If you spend time with someone who has a strong personality, you begin to act like him. That is the process. As you spend time with the Lord and get to know him, a slow process of transformation occurs.

Augustine said, "There is no true virtue without a miracle. Any progress we make toward authentic goodness is the product of our association with God. We must again and again come to him with our desires and lofty ideals and lay them at his feet." We must bring our weakness, our shame, our compulsions, our doubts, our fears, our misjudgments, our weariness, our staleness, and ask God to complete us.

The process of real change begins when we drop our veils and look at the face of Jesus.

Dave Roper reminds us, "There are no shortcuts to maturity. Our personalities, flawed as they are, resist

change. We are in recovery, gradually being delivered from evil. God is working even now for that distant end. We need to believe that his processes are adequate to deal with our sin." The key word is *process*. Meanwhile, as someone put it, "We must be comfortable with ourselves in process." God heals by degrees. Paul says we grow slowly, from one degree of likeness to the next, inch by inch, here a little, there a little. Gain is gain, however small.

Once we understand this we are free to be the kind of people who are winsome, attractive and full of grace and truth. We manifest a quality that speaks to others of God's goodness and his capacity to change us. We can fail and admit it. We don't need facades. We don't need to pretend. We can be up front and honest, genuine and transparent. The qualities that are growing in us are genuine, and others will want to emulate them.

Goodness is a job for God. Whatever conformity to goodness we achieve is the fruit of his doing. And "fruit" is exactly the right word. It suggests some hidden element quietly at work.

As I look at my own life, my progress has not been by quantum leaps and bounds, but by tentative steps and frequent falls. It is best seen in retrospect. But everything worth while takes time, and time is on our side. God is wonderfully patient. He will never give up on us until his work is done. So we can take down our veils. We are all in recovery. That is why we can be free to confess our sins to each other and pray for each other.

That kind of an open, honest fellowship where it's

safe to be you is a sign of life, a sign that God is free to work. Some of you have been hanging onto your veils for a long time. You have secrets lurking in your hearts that no one knows. You are afraid if anyone found out, your life would be over. But it's that very secret that is preventing your life from really beginning. The glory has to fade away, you have to die, so that you can really begin to live.

I will close with these words from Frederick Buechner:

People are prepared for everything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness there is a great light. They are prepared to go on breaking their backs plowing the same old field until the cows come home, without seeing, until they stub their toes on it, that there is a treasure buried in that field rich enough to buy Texas. They are prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains but not for a God who gives as much for an hour's work as for a day's. They are prepared for a mustard-seed kingdom of God no bigger than the eye of a newt, but not for the great banyan it becomes with birds in its branches singing Mozart. They are prepared for the potluck supper at First Presbyterian but not for the marriage supper of the lamb.

Jesus' kingdom calls us to a new and better way of generating righteousness, one that depends not on our performance but on his. We do not have to achieve, but merely follow. He has earned us the costly victory of God's acceptance. May we have the eyes to see and the courage to believe it.

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