

SERIES: Power through Weakness
SERMON: The Superiority of the New Covenant
SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 3:7-18
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I want you to engage your sanctified imaginations this morning. Transport yourself with me back to the year 950 B.C. Solomon is the King of Israel; the magnificent Temple of Solomon, which took 150,000 workers seven years to build, is just about 15 years old, having taken the place of the Tabernacle which was built in Moses' day some 500 years before. You live in Jerusalem and are a devout believer, so you walk to the Temple every Sabbath day with your family and enter the huge outer court where almost anyone can enter. There you mingle with other families and listen to various choirs and musical instruments.

Since you are Jewish you and your whole family are also able to go through the gates into the inner court, where readers stand in various porticos and recite portions of the Law of Moses. If you are a man over 13 years of age you can also go into the Holy Place, which is magnificent and awe-inspiring, but this is not a weekly practice. It is usually only on special holy days that you go in for the purpose of offering sacrifices, but this happens to be one of those numerous holy days.

You stand in line before the laver, a huge brass basin of water, where a priest dressed in elaborate robes accepts your sacrifice and declares you clean. Incense is burning, and there is a hush throughout the room. You stare at the great curtain that separates you from the mysterious Holy of Holies. You know that the Ark of the Covenant is behind that curtain, but you have never seen it and you never will. The time you spend in the Holy Place is probably less than ten minutes. The entire time at the Temple is less than an hour. You take your family and walk home, feeling a sense of awe from your experience in this magnificent house of worship.

Now, using your sanctified imagination again, transport yourself 1000 years into the future and from Jerusalem to the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor. Suppose you are a recent convert from paganism and a member of the church that Paul established there. It is Sunday evening, and you and the other Christians are meeting in a crowded home. There are no choirs and probably only a few portable musical instruments, but the people sing Psalms and spiritual songs and have a lengthy time of prayer.

Then Paul begins to speak. He doesn't wear a robe, he doesn't stand behind an altar; in fact, he is probably sitting down as he teaches. He reads portions of the OT and explains what it means, but he also talks about issues relevant to the lives of the congregation, challenging them, encouraging them, sometimes rebuking them for sin. Paul talks for a long time, and before you know it several hours have passed. The only smoke is from candles or lamps rather than incense—the kind of smoke that caused Eutychus to get sleepy and fall out of the window when Paul got long-winded during a church meeting in Troas (Acts 20:8).

Now which of these two kinds of services would you rather participate in on a regular basis? If you're honest, some of you are more comfortable with Old Testament worship. I think I can prove that simply by pointing out how many churches today have a decided Old Testament flavor. They meet in sanctuaries. The ministers are robed and are treated with great deference.

There is a holy place up front separated from the rest of the sanctuary by some sort of railing, and access to that area is limited. In some churches there is even a Holy of Holies, a sort of inner sanctum with its own dome, that is very mysterious, where no one goes.

The lighting in these churches is subdued and there may even be the strong smell of incense. The altar is at the center of worship, and if any teaching is done it is from a lectern off to the side. The architecture is magnificent, the height speaking of the majesty of God and the artwork speaking of His worth and value. Many church sanctuaries are actually shaped much like Solomon's temple.

Others of you are much more comfortable with New Testament type of worship—informal, teaching focused, clergy and laity mixed together, meeting places that reflect intimacy rather than transcendence. The lighting is bright so people can see their Bibles, and there is no incense. The service consists largely of teaching, prayer, communion, and plenty of fellowship. There's also lots of singing, though probably accompanied by a fair number of instruments.

I draw this contrast between New and Old Testament worship because I think a lot of us don't give much thought to why we do what we do when we come to church. We go along with what we're used to without even considering the possible historical or spiritual implications behind it. The fact is there is a lot more Old Testament theology, or Old Covenant theology, in most churches today (even in many evangelical churches) than we would ever imagine. And it's not necessarily a bad thing. I find it very interesting that the early Christians in Jerusalem continued to frequent the Temple and synagogues there, in addition to attending their house churches. Some of that may have been for purposes of evangelism, but I get the impression that they also found meaning and fulfillment there. In our own day we see two simultaneous movements—one toward informal, casual, intimate worship, and the other towards ceremonial, sacramental Christianity as many people look for a greater sense of transcendence in worship in this post-modern age. There is a lot of healthy debate in theological circles as to how much of OT worship practice we should be borrowing.

However, these external factors I have noted about worship are not the most important differences between the Old and New covenants. I actually think a person can hold to New Covenant theology even if he attends a church that has a lot of Old Covenant features, and *vice versa*. Hopefully in the course of the next half hour you will grasp the essential difference between these two covenants. (And I'll try to be sensitive toward any Eutychuses in the audience).

Hopefully you will recall that we were introduced to the two covenants last Lord's Day. Paul claims in 2 Cor. 3:6 that God "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." So important is this concept of being a New Covenant minister (and a New Covenant *Christian*) that Paul spends the rest of the chapter unpacking it. Let's read verses 7-18:

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? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. 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. 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. 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.

A covenant is an agreement between two parties. It may be an agreement between two equals whereby each party agrees to do certain things or suffer the consequences, or it may be an agreement imposed by one party on another, but even in the latter case the responsibilities of each are spelled out. The two greatest covenants in the Bible (the Old and the New) are of the latter variety—that is they are imposed by God on His people, spelling out not only what we must do but also what He agrees to do.

The Old Covenant was established by God at Mt. Sinai. There He gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments (mentioned in verse 7 as “engraved on letters of stone”), plus 603 additional laws and regulations which they were required to keep if they were to live long in the land and experience God’s blessing. If they failed they would experience God’s judgment. For His part, God promised not only blessing if they obeyed, but He also promised to atone for their sins through the use of the sacrificial system which He graciously included in the Law.

The New Covenant was predicted in Jeremiah 31:31, which we examined last Sunday, but was not inaugurated until the death of Christ on the Cross. Jesus held up the cup at the Last Supper and said, “This is the new covenant in my blood.” I believe He was referring to all that would be accomplished through His death, including the forgiveness of sins, the writing of God’s law on the minds and hearts of His people, and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit to enable them to keep His commandments.

Paul wants to be sure his listeners grasp the difference between these two covenants. His detractors in Corinth are largely Old Covenant ministers in that they were legalistic and focused on outward symbols; he is a New Covenant minister. If the congregation doesn’t understand the difference, they can easily be led astray, so Paul contrasts and compares the two covenants in this powerful and important passage.

The New Covenant has a greater glory than the Old ever had. (7-11)

Paul does not deny that the Old Covenant had a certain glory to it. There was glory in the Law, the Tabernacle, the Temple, the priesthood, the feasts, the sacrifices. One of the most important demonstrations of that glory was that when Moses came down from meeting with God on the top of Mt. Sinai. The Israelites weren't left wondering who he had been meeting with. Moses' face shown like the sun with the reflected glory of God. Medieval artists generally put haloes on the Holy family and the apostles, though there is very little evidence that they ever wore haloes. But Moses *did*.

Still, the ministry of the New Covenant, called here "the ministry of the Spirit," is even more glorious than the Covenant given through Moses. Three times in verses 8-11 we find similar phrases: "even more glorious," "much more glorious," and "how much greater is the glory." In what ways does the New have a greater glory than the Old? Well, first, . . .

The Old was a ministry that brought death, the New is "of the Spirit." Verse 7: "If the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory . . . will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?" In what sense did the Old Covenant bring death? The laws of the Old Covenant were numerous and covered virtually every aspect of an ancient Israelite's life. They came in the form, "obey and you will prosper, disobey and you will die." One would think that would motivate people to obey, but the fact is threats are rarely effective motivators. Just think about the illegal drug problem in the United States. The legal threats, the health threats, the threats to career and family are well-known, but they don't stop millions from experimenting. Baseball players will put at jeopardy their incredibly lucrative careers just to get a little bigger edge in performance; others will do the same just to get a high.

But let's bring the issue even a little closer to home. Suppose you are walking down the street and you see a sign on someone's lawn saying, "Don't spit on the lawn." What does that sign do? It starts the saliva running, doesn't it? You would never have even thought about spitting on that lawn until you were told not to; now you can hardly contain yourself. The nature of law is to generate a spirit of rebellion, which in turn leads to sanctions and can eventually lead to death.

God knew this human tendency toward rebellion when He gave the Law. He knew His people couldn't keep it. But He never intended for it to be a way of salvation. He intended for the Law to drive them to despair so they would cast themselves on His mercy. But instead of acknowledging their inability to keep God's Law and seeking His mercy, most of them began to practice a comparative sort of righteousness. Here's how it works: if I keep the Law better than you keep it (and, of course, I'm the one who keeps score), then I have a better chance than you have to be accepted by God. In the process they got bogged down in a works-salvation that was hopeless and produced only spiritual death. I'm not suggesting this was the universal response to God's Law. The fact is there was a faithful remnant that saw the Law as an expression of God's holiness rather than as a way of salvation. They sought His mercy through the sacrificial system and looked for a Messiah who would forgive them. But they were a decided minority. For most of the people, the Law brought death.

The New Covenant, on the other hand, starts at a whole different place. It too has laws, but it

provides a different kind of motivation—not threat but love. It promises up front the forgiveness of sins through the death of Messiah and offers His righteousness freely to the one who puts his faith in Him. Then it promises that God’s Spirit will be given to every New Covenant believer, enabling him to be obedient to a great degree than ever possible under the Old.

The Old condemned, the New acquits. Verse 9: “If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!” The Old Covenant condemned because no one could keep it and it was unbending. It brought people to the bar of God’s justice but provided no means for satisfying that justice other than the sacrificial system, which atoned for sin but didn’t remove it. The term “atone,” you know, literally means “to cover.” Animal sacrifices were only a temporary solution to sin and didn’t even provide *temporary* relief to those who were simply going through the motions. The New Covenant, however, imputes the righteousness of Christ permanently to the believer. Romans 3:20-22 tells us,

No one will be declared righteous (acquitted, declared “not guilty”) in God’s sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

As we saw last Sunday Paul’s own personal spiritual journey illustrates the superiority of the New Covenant to the Old in terms of its power to acquit. His Old Covenant credentials were impeccable, as revealed in Phil. 3:5,6. He led an outwardly blameless life of rigid conformity to the Old Covenant rituals and regulations. But after his dramatic, life-changing encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, he concluded that it was worthless to have “a righteousness of my own that comes from the law.” What he needed instead was “the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.” (Phil. 3:9).

The Old was fading away even in its prime, the New is permanent. Verse 11: “And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!” In the Book of Galatians Paul compares the period of the Old Covenant, or the Mosaic Law, to childhood or adolescence. It is necessary for every person to experience childhood and adolescence, but these were never meant to be final destinations. They provide us important life experiences and help us grow, but adulthood is the goal. The Old Covenant was God’s way of dealing with His people during their spiritual infancy. The New Covenant is God’s final way of dealing with His people until He ushers them into His presence.

Now so far Paul has been intent on informing us that the New Covenant has a greater glory than the Old ever had. But beginning in verse 12 he moves to its effect on ministers.

The New Covenant produces a greater boldness in its ministers. (12-18)

The mark of someone who has really understood and trusted the New Covenant is boldness. He finds a new confidence in God. He doesn't pussy-foot around truth. He steps out into the open with nothing to hide. He is utterly transparent. He sees his competence as from God, not himself. To make this point Paul draws a contrast with Moses.

The premier Old Covenant minister, Moses, put on a veil to hide the fact that Sinai's glory was fading. The entire account of Moses on Mt. Sinai is fascinating. I used to think that Moses put a veil on his face when he came back from visiting with God because otherwise the Israelites wouldn't have been able to withstand the shock of seeing the effects of God's glory on Moses. But that is not the case. Consider Exodus 34:33-35, where we find Moses having returned from the mountain with his face shining brightly:

When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever he entered the LORD's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the LORD.

Apparently Moses put the veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it “while the radiance was fading away.” Moses' principal concern may have been that the people would notice that his halo going dark. Like many of us, he may have been trying to preserve his reputation as a godly leader. Paul then uses this veil as a symbol:

This “veil” is a symbol of the spiritual blindness still plaguing Old Covenant followers.

Verse 14, 15: “to this day the same veil remains when the old Covenant is read. It has not been removed. . . . Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.” Spiritual blindness, friends, is a very real phenomenon, and a large percentage of Jewish people suffer from it. The reason may be, ironically, that they are so close to the truth. Do you realize that exposure to the truth of God can make some people much worse off, for they can become extremely proud and self-confident, while all the time missing the principal point. The Law of Moses came from God, so when Jewish people appeal to it they are appealing to God's own revelation. But then they ignore their own prophets' teaching (such as Isaiah 53) to the effect that the Law can never save them and the animal sacrifices can not take away sin—instead they need a perfect sacrifice, they need Messiah Jesus. That's the stumbling block they cannot get over.

The Old Covenant mentality puts all its marbles in the works basket. Think about this for a moment: If you are working your way to heaven and someone comes along to tell you that salvation is free, you're going to react violently, because you've invested a tremendous amount of time and resources in those works, and you don't want the props knocked out from under you. My experience is that the more devout a person is in pursuing righteous performance—whether through Jewish ceremonialism or liberal do-goodism or fundamentalist legalism—the more blind they become to the truth of the Gospel of grace and mercy.

Friends, Paul makes it clear that only Christ can remove the blindness. In verse 14 he says of the veil over the minds of the Old Covenant reader, “Only in Christ is it taken away.” Then in verse

16 he adds, “But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.” The crux of everything is one’s attitude to Jesus. Becoming more obedient won’t resolve the spiritual blindness; trying harder won’t do it; being more faithful at rituals won’t do it. Only Jesus can remove the blindness. And He will—for anyone and everyone who turns to Him. That’s a great promise there in verse 16: “But *whenever anyone* turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.” The spiritual blindness is removed.

True spiritual freedom comes only through the Holy Spirit. “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” The point Paul seems to be making here is that the Holy Spirit is deity. The same God who gave the Law to the Jewish people in the OT, is the One who has given His Holy Spirit under the New Covenant. And it is only through that Holy Spirit that any one finds true spiritual freedom—freedom from bondage to the Law, from Satan, from fear, from sin, and from death.

New Covenant ministers leave their faces unveiled so they can reflect the Lord’s glory. (17, 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 is not an easy verse to understand. It seems to be saying that unlike Moses, we have the privilege of gazing into the face of Jesus, and we don’t have to hide the results because they are not physical but spiritual. The result of our looking at the face of Jesus is not a physical glowing that fades with time, but a spiritual transformation of character that increases with time.

I think the key to this verse is understanding the nature of sanctification, or spiritual growth. There are some who teach that the life of the Spirit is a second blessing that one achieves when he receives the baptism of the Spirit and speaks in tongues. In other words, the Christian life is of two stages: when you confess faith in Christ you are here, and when you get the second blessing you’re suddenly up here. In fact, some even teach that you can reach a place of full sanctification.

But the Bible teaches that there is not only a second blessing, but a third, a fourth, and an infinite number of blessings available. We are transformed into the likeness of Jesus progressively and with ever-increasing glory. In other words, the Christian life is a continual process of growing into the likeness of Jesus. This process will culminate in the believer’s glorification, when Christ “will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21).

May I ask that we search our own hearts to see if that is the case. Can the people around us see growth in Christlikeness? Can they see the ever-increasing glory of Christ reflected in our lives?

Conclusion: May I return to where I started today? Do we borrow our worship practices from the Old Covenant or the New Covenant? Here at First Free it’s probably a combination. What’s far more important is this question: “Do we understand and accept New Covenant truth, or are we still laboring under an Old Covenant mind set?” Are we laboring under the false notion that we can keep enough laws and perform enough good deeds that we will earn God’s approval? If so, we are leaning on a broken reed.

God's law is good and it reveals His holy character, but it was never intended as a means of salvation. The way of salvation is to acknowledge our total inability to keep God's law and cast ourselves on His mercy by trusting the sacrifice of Christ for our sins on the Cross. Jesus died for us, He paid our penalty, and He offers the free gift of salvation when we put our faith in Him. If you have never put your trust in Him, won't you do it today?