

INTRODUCTION

As I’m teaching through this series entitled, “Hope for Cracked Pots,” I’d like to call your attention to a passage of scripture that begins in 2 Corinthians 3:6. The title of this message is “Unveiled at Last!”

When you hear the word “veil” what do you think about? Sometimes you see a bride wearing a beautiful bridal veil made of lace. Speaking of weddings, I heard about a little girl who was attending a wedding. She said, “Mommy, why do brides always wear white?” Her mother said, “Because they’re happy dear.” In a few minutes, the little girl said, “Mommy, if the brides wear white because they’re happy, why do the men wear black?”

You can usually see through a bridal veil, but a veil is also a thick piece of cloth used to cover and hide something. An example of this would be the veil that hung in the Jewish Temple. It separated the Holy of Holies from the Most Holy Place, and when Jesus died, that massive veil was torn in two from top to bottom. The word veil comes from the Latin word for covering, *vela*.

We’re going to talk about a veil as a face covering Moses wore, but I want to visualize a different picture as we talk about the expression “unveiled at last.” Sometimes when a statue has been commissioned, it will be covered from view until the time it is to be presented. There is usually an unveiling ceremony in which the covering is dramatically removed and the statue is revealed in all of its beauty. In this message, I want to unveil a beautiful truth that might have been hidden from some of you until today. It is the amazing truth of the power of God’s grace.

This truth is unveiled in a passage of scripture that’s a little longer than we usually read. But we’ve got to read it all to see the full context.

2 Corinthians 3:6-18. “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 [the Ten Commandments], came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily on the face of Moses because of its glory, fading as 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 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.”

When Paul wrote, “the letter kills” he was talking about the letter of the Old Testament Law.

When he wrote that the Spirit gives life, he was referring to living under grace in the Spirit-filled life. There really IS a radical difference between living under grace: It’s the difference between light and darkness; life and death; and heaven and hell!

1. THE LETTER KILLS: YOU’LL DIE UNDER THE BONDAGE OF RULES!

God’s law was given to the Jews in the Old Testament to basically show them they were sinners and it was *impossible* to keep it. God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and while he was gone, the Israelites melted down their gold and created a golden calf, one of the Egyptian deities. When Moses came down with the Commandments, he found the Israelites engaged in idolatry. He was enraged and commanded the Levites to go through the camp and kill every man responsible for the idolatry. Exodus 32:28 tells us 3,000 men died that day. So the first time the Law was preached, 3,000 people died. Compare that to the Day of Pentecost when Simon Peter first preached the gospel of grace. According to Acts 2:41, 3,000 people were saved that day. So, it is true that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life!

So WHY did God even give them the Law? I’m so glad you asked! The Bible clearly teaches:

(1) God gave the Law to point people to faith

God gave the Jews a set of rules that were impossible to keep, so they would realize **NOBODY** can be saved by good works. The nature of the letter of Law is such that you can keep every jot and tittle of it, but if you break just one single rule, you’re just as guilty as if you broke them all!

The Bible says, “Utterly cursed is every person who fails to carry out every detail written in the Book of the Law. The obvious impossibility of carrying out such a moral program should make it plain that no one can sustain a relationship with God that way...The Law was like those Greek tutors who escort children to school and protect them from danger or distraction, making sure the children will really get to the place they set out for. But now you have arrived at your destination: By faith in Christ you are in direction relationship with Christ.” (Galatians 3:10; 24 *The Message*)

Some Christians are confused and think people in the Old Testament time were saved by keeping the Law. Nope. If that’s the case, then nobody from the Old Testament times would be in heaven. So will there be any Old Testament characters in heaven? Sure. Moses will be there. Did he keep all the commandments? No. He murdered a guy. But he’ll be there because he put His faith in God’s plan. Will King David be there? Sure, but he broke a whole bunch of commandments. He’ll be in heaven for the same reason you and I can go to heaven: he placed his faith in God and had a personal relationship with Him.

(2) Many Christians are still in bondage to legalism

Now, I know there aren’t large herds of people who are still trying to obey all the commandments of the Old Testament. But we *do* have people are still trying to live by the letter of the Law. It’s just a new set of laws.

That’s the reason Paul wrote to the Galatians. They had been saved by grace, but they were still trying to please God by keeping a bunch of rules. He wrote, “How is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years...” (Galatians 4:9-10)

Legalism is alive and well and living in churches in the 21st century. Modern legalists may not be forbidding people to eat pork, but they have a long list of things you can do and can’t do. My definition of a legalist is someone whose list of rules is longer than God’s. And God’s New Testament list is pretty short—Love God and love your neighbor.

There are people today who don’t just try to keep the Ten Commandments; they have something more like the 500 commandments. Can you picture Charlton Heston as Moses coming down with the 500 commandments? He would have needed a wagon train!

You may think all of this talk about legalism is for preachers or for theologians only. But this is truth that applies to every Christian. I’d like to introduce you to a guy in our church who admits he lived under legalism for much of his life. His name is Donald Campbell. He’s married to Darla and they have one daughter Christi (and a dog named Charlie). Here’s Don’s testimony in his own words:

“Both my parents had grown up in severely legalistic homes and churches, thus they passed on to me what had been passed down to them; legalism: Perform in order to receive love and gain acceptance. I also believed I had to do certain things in order to please God like read and study my Bible, pray, tithe, have a quiet time, always be at church when the doors were open, teach Sunday School, lead Bible studies and vote in every election, and go on mission trips. Thus, I rolled up my sleeves and went to work living for Jesus. I became a legalist. And I put these demands upon myself, and I expected others to do the same.

But there was one problem—I couldn’t live the Christian life on a consistent basis. So, I lived with a lot of fear of God. I thought that God wasn’t pleased with my mediocre performance, and thus feared that He would withdraw His love and blessings. I was forever looking over my shoulder as if God was after me with His fly swatter or wooden spoon. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t seem to do the things I should do, and I couldn’t stop doing the things I shouldn’t do. I felt like I was a failure at living the Christian life. Saturday night December 14, 2002 I had come to the end of my rope. Alone in a darkened room, I lay on the floor crying out to God and weeping like a child. I was so disgusted with my life that I no longer wanted to live. How on earth did I end up like this?”

Sound familiar? Hang on, this letter is to be continued in a few minutes). The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Let’s see what that means:

2. GOD’S SPIRIT IN YOU GIVES LIFE: YOU CAN LIVE IN THE FREEDOM OF GRACE!

When the Bible says “the Spirit gives life” it’s talking about God’s Holy Spirit who lives inside every Christian. I think Eugene Petersen’s paraphrase of these last two verses makes it easier to appreciate: And when God is personally present, a living Spirit, that old, constricting legislation is recognized as obsolete. We’re free of it! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him. (2 Corinthians 3:17-18 *The Message*) Let me share with you three things that grace does for you that the law never could:

(1) Grace immediately sets you free!

2 Corinthians 3:17 says, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is FREEDOM.” When you are first saved by grace, you are set free from the penalty of sin, which is separation from God. But grace continues to liberate you as you understand that you are no longer under the bondage of the law. Let’s see the major differences between law and grace:

When asked what you must do for salvation Legalism says, “try your hardest” but Grace says, “trust in God.” Legalism emphasizes “what you do” but Grace emphasizes “what God does.” Legalism depends on “your resources” but Grace depends on “God’s resources. Legalism focuses on “external rules and regulations” while Grace focuses on “inner heart and your attitude.” Legalism is motivated by a “sense of duty or obligation” while Grace is motivated by “a desire to please God because you love God.” Legalism creates “bondage, guilt, and frustration” but Grace creates “freedom and joy.” The daily goal of a legalistic person is “try again, work more, give the maximum effort” while the goal of someone living under Grace is to “receive, trust, abide in Christ, and rest.” And the main difference is that legalism says, “I resolve to become pleasing to God” while Grace says, “I *rejoice* because I am pleasing to God.”

(2) Grace continually causes you to reflect God’s glory

The word “glory” appears nine times in these verses. The word glory (*doxa*) literally means “shining. Think of glory as meaning “to shine the spotlight on.” When we give God glory, we shine the spotlight on Him instead of ourselves.

Paul used an experience from the life of Moses to illustrate this glory. When Moses was up on Mt. Sinai with the Lord, he asked to see God. God said Moses couldn’t look into His face, or he would die. So God passed by and Moses caught a glimpse of God’s afterglow. But that was enough to light up Moses’ face with a supernatural radiance. The Bible says, “When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him...when Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face.” (Exodus 34:30, 33)

Moses’ glow faded with time, and from the language Paul used it appears Moses kept the veil in place long after the glow was gone. In other words, Moses wore a mask of holiness like many people do today. But the point is we don’t need a veil! We are unveiled because we reflect the glory of the Lord in our lives. Wouldn’t agree there are some Christians who just seem to shine with the presence of God in their lives?

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” Then He said, “Let your light shine before men.” Is He the light, or are we? Yes. If you look into the sky, you’ll see two large shining bodies. One is the sun and the other is the moon. The moon really doesn’t shine—it only reflects the light of the Sun. Jesus radiates the glory like the sun, and like the moon, we can only reflect His glory.

(3) Grace eventually transforms you to be like Jesus

The reason God puts His Spirit in us is to change us to be like Jesus. When we are fully surrendered to the Spirit, He produces in us the personality of Jesus, sometimes called the Fruit of the Spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, meekness, and self-control. The truth about God’s amazing grace is that we don’t have to imitate Jesus. We don’t have to try to act loving, or joyful. Instead, God has placed His Spirit in us to live the life of Jesus in us. The secret of the Christian life are those seven words in Colossians 1:27: “Christ IN YOU the Hope of Glory.”

Meanwhile, let’s go back to Don Campbell. When we left him, he was on his knees crying out to God.

“That pivotal night in December, I cried out to God, ‘I give up! I’ve tried and tried and I can’t do it! God, you have to change my heart and mind. I can’t. You do whatever it takes.’ God kept me in this furnace for six months in order to get me into a teachable state of mind. Then, he took my wife and me to a specialized ministry in Dallas called Exchanged Life Ministries Texas to teach me how to live the Christian life the way He intended.

I learned that God never intended for me to live the life that only Jesus Christ could live in and through me. No wonder I couldn’t successfully live the Christian life. I wasn’t supposed to. God wanted to do it for me as I lived dependently on Him. I learned that not only were salvation and going to heaven gifts of grace to be received by faith, but also the victorious Christian life of Jesus Christ Himself was given to me as a gift of grace...No longer do I need to struggle and strain to live for Jesus. Now I can rest and abide in Him, and He produces the life I could never pull off on my own. Now that I’m in love with Jesus, all of the disciplines of the Christian life I used to dread and hate to do are now pleasures and delights. Now I want and love to do them. Best of all, as I abide in Christ and allow His life to flow through me, He is causing me to be a Godly man, a great husband and loving father. I’m done with trying to live the Christian life. I’m letting Jesus Christ do it in and through me.”

And now that God’s grace has transformed Don’s life he leads a men’s discipleship group called “the Exchanged Life.” If you want more information check with the Welcome Center in the foyer.

CONCLUSION

In 1986 there was a movie released called “The Mission” starring Robert DeNiro as a slave trader and Jeremy Irons as a Jesuit Priest. The story was set in South America in 1750 when both missionaries and the slave traders were invading the territory of the South American natives.

I wouldn't recommend the movie to youngsters because of the National Geographic nudity and the violence, which is historically accurate. But there is one amazing scene in the movie that taught me a great lesson about grace.

Robert DeNiro plays Rodrigo Mendoza, a wicked, cruel slave trader. In a drunken rage, Rodrigo even murders his own brother. Distraught with guilt, Rodrigo confesses this sin to the priest who tells him to travel into the forest to a Christian mission the priests have established with the natives. For penance, Rodrigo must also drag through the forest a huge net filled with pots, pans, weapons, armor, pieces of iron, stones—anything to make it almost too heavy to carry.

So you see Rodrigo dragging this tremendous weight through the rain forest. He is exhausted when he comes to a sheer cliff beside a waterfall that he must climb. So up he starts...step by agonizing step with the heavy net pulling on his neck and shoulders.

He falls onto a ledge and spills the contents from the net. Bloodied, but determined, he refills the net with the heavy reminders of his past and resumes his agonizing climb. Finally he reaches the final ledge. It's within his grasp, but he's totally exhausted. All he has to do is to heave himself over the ledge, but he can't move another inch. His face is contorted in pain and his muscles are shaking with exertion.

As you watch it on the screen you know he can't make it. As his fingers begin to slip, a face appears. It's the face of one of the natives, whose tribe Rodrigo had plundered and killed. The native takes out a long knife and approached Rodrigo. It looks as if he may slit Rodrigo's throat as he hangs onto the ledge. Rodrigo knew he was guilty of murder and could do nothing but accept his fate. But instead of slitting his throat of his enemy, the native cut the net away and it crashes to the forest below. As the tremendous weight is removed, the native pulls Rodrigo over the ledge to safety. This native along with the rest the tribe had been converted to Christ by the Jesuit priests. As Rodrigo kneels there he sees the priest, played by Jeremy Irons. The priest hugs Rodrigo, and then the other natives standing there laugh and hug Rodrigo as he cries tears of repentance. Rodrigo later becomes a Jesuit missionary himself.

When I saw that scene, tears came to my eyes as I realized that it was a parable of grace. You and I are guilty, and at one time we all carry the burden of the mistakes of our past. It's like a huge weight tied around our necks. We all must come to a place where we are at the end of our strength and realize that unless someone saves us we are goners. And even though we killed the precious Son of God, Jesus comes to cut away that net containing all the weight and burden of past. And as we feel that burden fall away, we suddenly are enveloped in His grace and love.

I'm a recovering legalist, and I know how Rodrigo felt to have that weight cut away. Don Campbell knows how it feels to have that weight of performance pressure removed. Have you been set free by God's grace?

So, what’s the truth that is “unveiled at last?” It’s the liberating truth that you don’t have to live under the law—you can live under grace. The veil isn’t over God’s grace, but the veil may be over your eyes, or your mind. If you’re struggling along, trying to live the Christian life in your own strength no wonder you’re miserable. There is more!

I’ve often heard Christians talk about receiving “a second blessing.” By second blessing they’re referring to some kind of encounter with the Holy Spirit after their initial experience of salvation. Every Christian should be filled with the Holy Spirit, but I don’t believe that it’s a “second blessing” kind of experience. You can receive the Holy Spirit and be filled at the moment of salvation, and, then you must continually keep on being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Having said that, I *do* believe in “a second blessing.” I believe the second blessing of the Christian life is understanding all you received at the first blessing! For instance, once you truly understand grace, it’s like a second conversion—a second blessing. It’s such a revolutionary discovery that Chuck Swindoll entitled an entire book, *The Grace Awakening*. God’s grace has been there all along, but if you’re still living under legalism, you’re still carrying a heavy weight when Jesus has set you free. Have you discovered “the second blessing?”

Actually, I even believe in a “third blessing.” The third blessing is understanding that you didn’t discover it all in the second blessing! And the fourth blessing is realizing that you didn’t discover it all in the third blessing! That’s why you can spend the rest of your life being blessed and move “from glory to glory” as it says in the KJV or with “ever increasing glory” as it says in the NIV.

OUTLINE

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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes