

HOW TO KEEP A SHINING FACE

2 Corinthians 3:4–18

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Our Scripture today continues to be from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. We begin today with chapter 3, verse 4, and read to the end of the chapter. I'd like to make a few remarks about the Scripture as I read it. Then we'll come specifically to the message today, which really arises out of the last verse. Verses 4–5 of chapter 3 say, "Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God" (NIV). It's good to know that we can have a feeling of confidence and ability. But we recognize, as Paul does, that all competence and ability and confidence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant.

Paul, in this passage, is comparing the new with the old covenant. A covenant in the Scripture is different than a contract. With a contract we sign, two equal parties sit down and negotiate a deal, whether it's the sale of a house or a car or a piece of property or something like that. But a covenant, in the Scripture, is made by a superior with an inferior. It is equivalent to a last will and testament. That is, the one who makes it has absolute control over the terms of what is made. The one who is inferior simply has no power to alter or change the covenant in any respect. His only ability is to decide whether to receive or reject the covenant.

Paul is saying that an old covenant was made at Sinai with Moses, which came with great glory, but it had certain limitations. Now in Jesus Christ, a new covenant has been made.

New. There are two words in the Greek for "new." One is "new in point of time." The other one is "new," not only in point of time, but "new in quality, like there's never been anything like it before." When you get a new car, you get one that's new in point of time, but it's like all other

HOW TO KEEP A SHINING FACE

2 Corinthians 3:4–18

cars—four wheels, a motor, a windshield. But the new covenant is something that has never been before. A whole new thing.

Paul is saying to these Corinthians who were being enchanted with persons who were wanting to return them to legalism and to Judaism with a Christian flavor, “No, you’ve already got a new covenant. It’s a better covenant. The old covenant had a letter to it. But we’ve got the covenant of the Spirit. The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

“If the ministry that brought death...” (verse 7, NIV) The word “ministry” is literally the word “deacon”; the function of the old covenant was to serve out death to people. How did it do that?

If you tried to keep the old law at Sinai, you found that you always failed. You could never completely keep God’s law. You were always failing, and that ministered death. “The soul that sinneth shall die” (Ezekiel 18:20). But there was also, with the old covenant, the necessity of animal sacrifice. Every year, there were 1,191 animals slain. Just for the sins of the nation as a whole. Excluding individual personal sacrifices that would have been offered, which would have numbered into the tens of thousands a year. “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. [The old covenant is like the moon when the sun comes out. It fades from view.] 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

HOW TO KEEP A SHINING FACE

2 Corinthians 3:4–18

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" (2 Corinthians 3:7–18, NIV).

My message this morning, really drawn more from verse 18, is simply titled "How to Keep a Shining Face." My wife is always telling me I show my feelings in my face. A lot of us are like that. We show our feelings in our face. Verse 18 tells us that we, with unveiled faces, are all beholding and reflecting the Lord's glory. That would suggest, as we look at Jesus, a face that is filled with His radiance. A shining face. Maybe your face doesn't feel all that shining with Christ's glory today.

I thought about that as I pondered on the title. It seemed to me that there are some things that can come along that can dim the shine on the Christian's face, if we let them. One certainly is hardships. Facing a lot of stress, pressure, economic problems, health problems, circumstantial problems, friendship problems—hardships. Someone in the congregation commented that they'd been a Christian less than a year, and it seemed like more bad things had happened since they'd become a Christian than in their whole lifetime—getting very seriously ill, losing their job, and a few other things like that. I realized that that can dim the shine on our face. Those kinds of things are going to happen to us, whether we become Christians or not. I think the difference is that with Christ we can face those in a much different way than we could have faced them without Him. But hardships can certainly put a kind of troubled look on our face.

HOW TO KEEP A SHINING FACE

2 Corinthians 3:4–18

Another thing that can dim the shine on our face is self-gratification outside of God's will. That's simply a fancy phrase for sin. Sin is self-gratification outside God's will. It's reaching out to please yourself in a way that's not approved by the Lord. Certainly, when there's clear known sin in our lives, it keeps our spiritual visage at a dimmer wattage.

Persecution can cause the shine to dim in some people. Not necessarily in all. But when you're under a heavy gun of peer pressure, or if you're living in a country where there's strong pressure, even against being a Christian, this can produce a very dejected kind of look.

I think seduction—subtle ways that the enemy seduces us away from purity and simplicity in our faith—can produce a lack of a shining face. That appears to be the problem at Corinth. There had been those who came to the church at Corinth and ministered and were persons who had a strong legalistic emphasis in their messages, they were returning people to the law, away from grace.

Paul's having to write to correct that. Persons who begin living a law-oriented life. How well I am doing in terms of pleasing God by every requirement He's given can become very cast-down.

Being critical and judgmental can dim the light on our face. Having a good hot time chewing somebody out can dim the light on our face. It's amazing how, when we get critical and judgmental, the light on our face dims. The devil likes to sneak up on us and catch us at our most spiritual moments. That's what's perverse about temptation. Temptation doesn't just hit people out in the gutter. It hits the most spiritual, pious people.

People disappointment can keep the light of the Lord from glowing in our face. If we really look to a person and they failed us. Maybe a fellow member of the body, maybe a member of the family, maybe an example we really looked to and let us down.

Loneliness can cause a lot of dejection on the face too.

HOW TO KEEP A SHINING FACE

2 Corinthians 3:4–18

How do you keep the shine on your face and even see it becoming brighter? There are three steps we read today here in this chapter.

I. The first one is simply this: Keep your eyes on Jesus.

The surest way I know to reflect the image of the Lord Jesus Christ in your face is to look at Him. “We behold His face as in a mirror” is literally what Paul is saying. We behold His face, and we, in turn, are reflecting the face we see. When I look in the mirror, the mirror is reflecting back to me the face I see. That’s the idea that Paul is advancing in this text. That as we look into the personality of Jesus Christ, what we mirror back is the personality of Jesus. We recognize that when we say, “Look at Jesus,” there is no physical description we have of Jesus from the New Testament. We have no idea what He looked like physically. But we know what His character was like. And we know that, if we can keep looking at that character and saying, “Lord change me into that kind of character,” God will do that work in our life.

When we fail, it helps to keep our eyes on Jesus too. If we get our eyes on ourselves and our failure, and all the people are looking at us, and maybe some people know about our failure and say, “You failed,” we can get our eyes on ourselves and the people looking at us and get them off Jesus. If we get them off Jesus, then we can’t be changed into His glory. When I fail, keeping my eyes on Jesus means I know I have someone I can turn to.

Paul says, “We’re to contemplate, we’re to behold the Lord, and we’re to reflect Him.”

How to have a shining face: First, keep your eyes on Jesus.

II. Second step: Keep your eyes on Jesus.

That’s the first step and that’s the second step. Keep your eyes on Jesus. You become what you look at. You mirror what you contemplate. Stephen is being pelted with rocks, but his face is glowing like an angel. Our face will either mirror the face of Jesus or mirror our circumstances.

HOW TO KEEP A SHINING FACE

2 Corinthians 3:4–18

The faces looking at Stephen, in Acts 7, were gnashing their teeth and grating at him. But he was smiling back with the radiance of Christ because he had chosen not to mirror his circumstances but to let his face mirror the Lord's.

Perhaps you remember Hawthorne's *The Great Stone Face*. A little lad lived in a village where there was a mountain where there was a rock formation they called "The Great Stone Face." The people had a legend that someday someone would come to their village who would look like the great stone face. He would do wonderful things for the village and he would be a means of great blessing. Somehow, that story—the legend of the stone face—took hold upon that little boy living in that village. During his lifetime, he would gaze at that great stone face many, many times—every opportunity he had. And he would dream that someday, someone would come to his town with the great stone face and bless them and do good works for the villagers. Years passed. As time went by, the young boy became a young man, he became a middle-aged man and finally an old man. He was tottering down the street one day when someone looked up and saw him coming by and shouted, "He has come! The man who looks like the great stone face has come." This man had looked into the stone face for so long that, in Hawthorne's story, he finally bore the image of what he looked like and looked at. So we, as Paul says, as we behold the face of Jesus, are likewise being changed.

I mentioned my message today had three points of how to have a shining face. I'm going to be like the country preacher who stood up, and when he began to preach, said, "Today, my sermon has three points. First I'm going to tell you what I'm going to say. Second, I'm going to say it. And third, I'm going to tell you what I said."

So my three points today to keep a shining face—One: Keep your eyes on Jesus. Two: Keep your eyes on Jesus.

HOW TO KEEP A SHINING FACE

2 Corinthians 3:4–18

III. Three: Keep your eyes on Jesus.

This does not involve our putting on an artificial mask. It doesn't involve us just sort of doing facial exercises to have the Christian goodie look. In fact, we're told that Moses, with the fading glory of the law, used to speak to the people with his veil off. Then, when he went back in, he'd put the veil on and come back out, and when he came back, the people wouldn't see the fact that his face was dimming. Moses kept the veil on, evidently, until all the glory was gone. It was like the people couldn't handle a messenger whose glory was fading. So he wore a mask. He wore a mask so they couldn't see the fading glory. That is often the case in our own Christian experience. We keep a mask on to maybe hide what is really happening inside of us: the fading glory.

“We as believers have freedom,” Paul says, “to take the veil off so that people can see the stages of our transformation.” When I was preparing for ministry, it was impressed upon me subtly that ministers, especially, of all people, should never be vulnerable—never share their weak points or where they'd gone wrong or anything like that—but always project an image of perfection. It's been difficult for me to switch gears and get into Paul's method for Christians, that we ought to be vulnerable and transparent enough with one another so people can see our growth progress over a period of time. We have the courage to take the mask off and be seen as we really are, and we're being changed from glory to glory.

The word “transformed” here is a fascinating word. “We are being transformed into His likeness” (2 Corinthians 3:18). In the Greek, it is the same word that is used in the Gospels for the Transfiguration of Jesus. It literally means, in the Greek, “metamorphosis.” It describes a process that happens when a tadpole becomes a frog. It is going through metamorphosis. It is changing form or structure. The word refers to Jesus at the Transfiguration, when His eternal

HOW TO KEEP A SHINING FACE

2 Corinthians 3:4–18

form of God shone through His humanity. And it's used of believers twice, in Romans 12:2 and here, in 2 Corinthians 3:18, to describe the change that's coming in our nature. Paul says in Romans 12:2 as well, "Be not conformed to this world but be transformed." The word he uses for "conformed" is not "metamorphosis." It's the word which means "scheme" or "fashion." The word he uses for being "'transformed' in the renewing of our mind" is to literally "change form or structure." There's an important difference between the two words. The Greek says *schema* is something outward that's changing. But *morphe* is something eternal and unalterable and basic. When I look at myself in a mirror, I see that my *schema* is different today than it was some thirty years ago, when I had curly red hair. And my *schema* is going to continue to change as I get older. The outward man. But my *morphe* has always been male, and will always be male. The basic structure. So Paul, in writing to us in Romans 12:2, says, "Don't be conformed to this world." Or Phillips says "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold." This mold changes. What people outside of Christ think is right today will disagree with what they think is right tomorrow. Things are passing away. But you have an essential basic change in your nature. What we're being told in the Christian life is that, beginning with new birth, that essential change in our nature takes place. And we are being transformed from people who bore the image of Adam to people who bear the image of Christ. We're on a journey of transformation. Our nature is being altered. Sometimes, younger people who are filled with idealism and what a real Christian should be look at the failure of older Christians and say, "They're just bunch of hypocrites." If a tadpole, in the process of becoming a frog, doesn't look like a tadpole or a frog, you wouldn't say that that tadpole is being a big hypocrite; it doesn't know whether it's a tadpole or a frog. You would look at it and say, "I know that that thing, whatever it is right now, is in the process of change."

HOW TO KEEP A SHINING FACE

2 Corinthians 3:4–18

That's exactly what's happening with us as believers, we're in the process of change. You can find me sometimes in my life and I may look more like Adam's child than Christ's child. And I may find you some moments, and you may look that way too. But over a period of time, as we continue to behold the face of Jesus Christ, His personality and the like, we are being transformed into His likeness, metamorphosed into His nature; so that, just as we have borne the image of the man of earth, we'll also bear the image of the man from heaven.

I think our heavenly Father—maybe if you've been a Christian for a while—looks at when we first came to Christ, and there's a joy and beauty and freshness about that. But He also sees us now, wherever you're at in that journey. And the Father is glad that you've committed yourself to looking at the face of Jesus Christ. You've committed yourself to changing into His nature and, just as surely as it is built into the genetic code that a tadpole is going to become a frog, so God has built that into your spiritual makeup as well. He's not going to be content with you—and you're not going to be content with yourself—and He's not going to be finished with you until you've become like His Son, Christ Jesus. Keep a shining face. Keep looking at Jesus and you'll become what you look at.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we thank You that step-by-step You are transforming us, from glory unto glory. We thank You for the freedom of the gospel, which means we don't have to wear some artificial mask. But we can look at Jesus and He can look at us—even in the moment when we don't feel like looking at Him because we have made such a failure out of our life. Maybe there are people here that have had bad failures this last week. Lord, we take this service, these closing moments, to focus our eyes upon You. We say, Lord, that our problem came because our eyes got off of You and now, Lord, don't let our problem be compounded by thinking that, in our failure, we

HOW TO KEEP A SHINING FACE

2 Corinthians 3:4–18

must keep our eyes away from You. Help us, Lord, to turn our eyes to Jesus today. There are people in this congregation facing real severe problems and stresses related to finances. Problems within family, health problems. We can look at all these things and, in the natural, we can become very discouraged. So it's important that we take this moment to redirect our gaze to You again. We know there's always hope in You. There's always glory in You. Your plans for us are not for evil but for good, to give us purpose and hope. We're thankful for the changes You're working out in our life. Even through adversity, You're working out changes in us. We're glad that You're changing us. We're glad that that's the responsibility of the Spirit. We're delighted to go along with His wishes. Live in us, Lord. We thank You. In Christ's name. Amen.