

SECOND CORINTHIANS 3:7–18. (EHV)

If the ministry that brought death (which was engraved in letters on stone) came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look directly at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face (though it was fading), how will the ministry of the spirit not be much more glorious? For if the ministry that brought condemnation has glory, the ministry that brought righteousness has even more glory. In fact, in this case, what was glorious is no longer very glorious, because of the greater glory of that which surpasses it. Indeed, if what is fading away was glorious, how much more glorious is that which is permanent! Therefore, since we have this kind of hope, we act with great boldness. We are not like Moses, who put a veil over his face, so that the Israelites could not continue to look at the end of the radiance, as it was fading away. In spite of this, their minds were hardened. Yes, up to the present day, the same veil remains when the Old Testament is read. It has not been removed because it is taken away only in Christ. Instead, to this day, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts. But whenever someone 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. But all of us who reflect the Lord's glory with an unveiled face are being transformed into his own image, from one degree of glory to another. This too is from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Martin Luther's colleague, Philip Melancthon, was known to say after Martin Luther had passed away that the greatest legacy he left the Christian Church was the distinction between the law and the gospel. That distinction not only informs the Christian life, but it also helps us to understand the Scriptures. How can the prophets turn on a dime from chewing out and warning and threatening their audience in one moment to suddenly comforting and encouraging and assuring them the next? The Scriptures have two main teachings—the law and the gospel.

And of course, Martin Luther didn't just invent this out of thin air. He didn't come up with this distinction on his own. He found it in the Scriptures, not just in the vastly different messages that the prophets preached, but also talked about explicitly by Christ's apostles, like the apostle Paul here in 2 Corinthians 3.

Paul doesn't use the terms *law* and *gospel* here, but that is what he is talking about. He says there are two ministries, two messages that serve to meet people's needs, in the Scriptures. He calls them the ministry of the letter and the ministry of the Spirit, and he distinguishes between the two.

1. Different Effect

Paul would not speak of the law and the gospel this way, as two ministries, if both did not serve us in some way, if both were not somehow necessary for us. That's the basic definition of a ministry—a service considered to be necessary that is rendered to someone.

But the services rendered by the law and the gospel are very different. One of the differences between them is their effect. Paul describes the law as something written or engraved in letters on stone tablets. And he implies that the way God gave his law, his demands of what we should do and not do, is a sort of metaphor for how the law works. Just as stone is a cold, dead thing, without life, so God's law does not bring about any internal change in our souls or spirits,

which are naturally cold and dead. God's law works on us only from outside of us, not from inside of us.

You may have already read Luther's comments on this inside the back cover of the bulletin. There are many Christian teachers and laypeople who think that God would not have commanded or demanded something unless we were able to fulfill it. If God commands it, we must be able to do it and there must be people who do it, they think. But as Luther said, you can put that to the test yourself if you have children at home. Just because you parents say that something should be done doesn't mean that it actually gets done, does it? If you are students, just because your teachers at school assign something doesn't mean that you students will do it, or even necessarily that you have the ability to do it.

Back when I was attending college, I remember some of my classmates and I wondering out loud, "How can these professors all give us these large assignments and expect that we're going to get them all done?" Some of those who were more bold asked them that, and the wiser of the professors would answer by telling us that was intentional. Having more assignments than we can get done in a day is life. We needed to learn how to prioritize and get done what needed to get done, and to make sure that we would still pass and get our degree. Just because an assignment is given doesn't mean it can be fulfilled, and that is especially true with the demands of God's law.

God's law works on us from outside of us. And so, at best, it can make us do something physically, but it cannot make us do it as God wants it to be done—willingly and with our whole being.

The gospel, on the other hand, works on us from inside of us. Paul describes the gospel as the ministry of the Spirit, both because it is something written by the Spirit of the living God and because he writes it on human hearts. He writes it in our spirits. The gospel is the good news about how Christ has fulfilled the law perfectly on our behalf, and has died to pay the full punishment that we deserve for our disobedience. This message changes us from within, so that we want to do and are seeking to do what the law commands us to do, even before the law's demands return to our eyes and ears.

This is why, by the way, there is a huge difference between the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of heaven. The only tool the kingdom of the world has is the law. At best, it can only change outward behavior. Only the gospel, the tool of the kingdom of heaven, can change human hearts. This is why the notion that if we just get the right people in power, if we just pass the right laws, we will be a more Christian nation is completely false. Don't get me wrong—it is good for a nation to have good and godly laws—but Christianity is not primarily seeking certain actions. It is primarily seeking human hearts. And the law cannot do anything to secure hearts.

In fact, Paul also calls the law the ministry that brings death, the ministry that brings condemnation, the ministry that enslaves. Because the law has no power to change our hearts, the best it can do is make us aware of how poorly we keep it, of how often we have violated it, of how enslaved we are to sin. And the more we realize that, the less hope we have of a pleasant afterlife and the more powerfully we smell the flames of hell. Or, at worst, it can succeed in turning our attention away from the heart and only looking at outward action, like it did with the Pharisees, and thereby deceive us into thinking we have actually kept it. So it either makes us despair of salvation or it makes us smug, proud, and self-righteous. Either way, if all a person has

is God's demands, which are all any of us have by nature, there is only one eternal outcome—condemnation.

But the gospel Paul calls the ministry that bring righteousness, justification, and freedom. Through the good news about Christ's work on our behalf, God gives the gift of faith in Christ, and through that faith he clothes us in Christ's own righteousness. Through that faith, he connects us to the declaration of innocence that Christ won for the world on Good Friday. Through that faith, he frees us from our slavery to sin, both our slavery to sin's accusations and guilt, and also from sin's power over our lives, so that we have the ability to carry out God's will freely, instead of under compulsion. Through that faith, through that gift of the righteousness of Another, we have the certainty of a different eternal outcome—salvation, eternal life in heaven.

2. Different Glory

And that brings us to the second difference that Paul underscores between the law and the gospel, between the ministry of the letter and the ministry of the spirit. The law and the gospel not only have different effects; they also have a different glory.

The law certainly had glory. It came from God, and so when Moses went to speak with God and God gave him the stone tablets with his laws on them or clarification about those laws, Moses's face was shining when he returned to the Israelites—so much so that the Israelites could not look directly at his face and were afraid to come close to him, until he summoned them to come to him.

But Paul points out that the glory of the law is a fading, impermanent glory. Moses himself knew that. That is why he would put a veil over his face after he finished speaking to the Israelites. He did not want the Israelites to see the glory fade away and come to an end.

But the glory of the gospel is seen in Christ's transfiguration. That glory is there—a glory so brilliant Jesus's face was shining like the sun and his clothes became whiter than the light. But then Jesus turned it off again, so to speak, because this side of heaven, this glory is a hidden glory. Hidden behind the flesh of the Son of Man. Hidden behind his Word. Hidden behind his cross, his suffering and death. Hidden behind the cross of his followers, as they deny and struggle against self day after day. Hidden behind water. Hidden behind bread and wine.

But unlike the glory of the law, which started out bright and then faded, the glory of the gospel starts out hidden but will eventually be revealed in all its fullness. "All of us who reflect the Lord's glory with an unveiled face are being transformed into his own image, from one degree of glory," the hidden glory here on earth, "to another," the revealed glory in heaven.

Brothers and sisters, you have a glory greater than that of Moses, the minister of the law. It is a hidden glory now, so that you can reflect it to others through your life and your words without scaring anyone away. Don't put a veil over it or attempt to hide it. That's not needed. Live in this glory, live out this glory, by listening to your Savior's voice, his voice that clothes you in his righteousness, his voice that justifies you, his voice that sets you free, his voice that saves you eternally. Amen.