

BOLD



Wiersbe, Warren W. 1996. The Bible Exposition Commentary. Vol. 1. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

2 CORINTHIANS 3:1-11 (NKJV)

¹ Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you?

² You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men;

³ clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.

⁴ And we have such trust through Christ toward God.

⁵ Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God,

⁶ who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

⁷ But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away,

⁸ how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?

⁹ For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory.

¹⁰ For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels.

¹¹ For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.

A COUNTERFEIT GOSPEL

Warren Wiersbe states: "Wherever you find the genuine, you will discover somebody promoting the counterfeit." Even art critics have been fooled by fake "masterpieces," and sincere publishers have purchased "valuable manuscripts," only to discover them to be forgeries.

Henry Ward Beecher was right when he said, "A lie always needs a truth for a handle to it."

A COUNTERFEIT GOSPEL

The Gospel of God's grace begin to spread among the Gentiles, and a counterfeit "gospel" appeared with a mixture of law and grace. It was carried by a zealous group of people that we have come to call "the Judaizers."

Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians to refute their doctrines, and you will find him referring to them several times in 2 Corinthians.

THEIR FALSE TEACHING

- Their primary emphasis was that salvation was by faith in Christ plus the keeping of the Law (see Acts 15:1ff).
- They also taught that the believer is perfected in his faith by obeying the Law of Moses.

Their “gospel of legalism” was prevalent because it is human nature to enjoy achieving religious goals instead of simply trusting Christ and allowing the Holy Spirit to work. It is much easier to measure “religion” than true righteousness.

PAUL'S RESPONSE

Paul looked on these false teachers as “peddlers” of the Word of God (see 2 Cor. 2:17, NIV), “religious racketeers” who preyed on the lack of knowledge of the new converts. He rejected their devious methods of teaching the Bible (2 Cor. 4:2) and despised their tendency to boast about their converts (2 Cor. 10:12–18).

How did Paul refute the doctrines and practices of these legalistic false teachers? By showing the surpassing glory of the ministry of the Gospel of the grace of God. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul contrasted the ministry of the Old Covenant (Law) with the ministry of the New Covenant (grace), and he proved the superiority of the New Covenant ministry.

TABLETS OF STONE – HUMAN HEARTS

2 CORINTHIANS 3:1-3 (NKJV)

- ¹ Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you?
- ² You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men;
- ³ clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.

TABLETS OF STONE – HUMAN HEARTS

The Judaizers boasted that they carried “letters of recommendation” (2 Cor. 3:1, NIV) from the “important people” in the Jerusalem church, and they pointed out that Paul had no such credentials.

It is a sad thing when a person measures his worth by what people say about him instead of by what God knows about him.

Paul needed no credentials from church leaders; his life and ministry were the only recommendations necessary.

TABLETS OF STONE – HUMAN HEARTS

When God gave the Law, He wrote it on tablets of stone, and those tablets were placed in the Ark of the Covenant. Even if the Israelites could read the two tablets, this experience would not change their lives.

The Law is an external thing, and people need internal power if their lives are to be transformed.

The legalist can admonish us with “Do this!” or “Don’t do that!”, but he cannot give us the power to obey. If we do obey, often it is not from the heart, and we end up worse than before!

TABLETS OF STONE – HUMAN HEARTS

The ministry of grace changes the heart.

The Spirit of God uses the Word of God and writes it on the heart.

The Corinthians were lost sinners when Paul came to them, but his ministry of the Gospel of God's grace completely changed their lives.

1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-11 (NKJV)

⁹ Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites,

¹⁰ nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.

¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

TABLETS OF STONE – HUMAN HEARTS

Their experience of God's grace certainly meant more to them than the letters of commendation carried by the false teachers.

The Corinthian believers were lovingly written on Paul's heart, and the Spirit of God had written the truth on their hearts, making them "living epistles of Christ."

The test of ministry is changed lives, not press releases or statistics.

DEATH – LIFE

2 CORINTHIANS 3:4-6 (NKJV)

⁴ And we have such trust through Christ toward God.

⁵ Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God,

⁶ who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

DEATH – LIFE

Paul was quick to give the glory to God and not to himself. His confidence (“trust”) was in God, and his sufficiency came from God. Paul was a brilliant and well-educated man, yet he did not depend on his adequacy. He depended on the Lord.

The legalists, of course, told people that any person could obey the Law and become spiritual. A legalistic ministry has a way of inflating people’s egos.

DEATH – LIFE

When you emphasize the grace of God, you must tell people that they are lost sinners who cannot save themselves.

- Paul's testimony was, "But by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:10).
- No one is sufficient of himself to minister to the hearts of people. That sufficiency can only come from God.
- Paul used the Old Covenant and the New Covenant as he contrasted them.

DEATH – LIFE

In 2 Corinthians 3:6, “the letter” refers to the Old Covenant Law, while “the spirit” refers to the New Covenant message of grace.

Paul was not contrasting two approaches to the Bible, a “literal interpretation” and a “spiritual interpretation.”

He was reminding his readers that the Old Covenant Law could not give life; it was a ministry of death.

GALATIANS 3:21-25 (NKJV)

²¹ Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law.

²² But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

²³ But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed.

²⁴ Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

²⁵ But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

DEATH – LIFE

The Gospel gives life to those who believe because of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Paul was not suggesting that the Law was a mistake or that its ministry was unimportant. Far from it!

Paul knew that the lost sinner must be slain by the Law and left helplessly condemned before God's grace could save him. John the Baptist came with a message of judgment, preparing the way for Jesus and His message of saving grace.

DEATH – LIFE

A legalistic ministry brings death. Preachers who major in rules and regulations keep their congregations under a dark cloud of guilt, and this kills their joy, power, and effective witness for Christ.

Christians who are constantly measuring each other, comparing “results,” and competing with each other, soon discover that they are depending on the flesh and not the power of the Spirit.

There never was a standard that could transform a person's life, and that includes the Ten Commandments. Only the grace of God, ministered by the Spirit of God, can transform lost sinners into living epistles that glorify Jesus Christ.

DEATH – LIFE

Paul's doctrine of the New Covenant was not something that he invented for the occasion.

As a profound student of the Scriptures, Paul certainly had read Jeremiah 31:27–34, as well as Ezekiel 11:14–21.

In the New Testament, Hebrews 8–10 is the key passage to study.

The Old Covenant Law, with its emphasis on external obedience, was preparation for the New Covenant message of grace and the emphasis on internal transformation of the heart.

FADING GLORY – INCREASING GLORY

2 CORINTHIANS 3:7-8 (NKJV)

⁷ But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away,
⁸ how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?

FADING GLORY – INCREASING GLORY

2 CORINTHIANS 3:9-11 (NKJV)

⁹ For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory.

¹⁰ For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels.

¹¹ For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.

FADING GLORY – INCREASING GLORY

This paragraph is the heart of the chapter, and it should be studied in connection with Exodus 34:29–35.

Paul did not deny the glory of the Old Covenant Law, because in the giving of the Law and the maintaining of the tabernacle and temple services, there certainly was glory.

What he affirmed, however, was that the glory of the New Covenant of grace was far superior, and he gave several reasons to support his affirmation.

The New Covenant glory means spiritual life, not death (vv. 7-8).

When Moses descended from the mountain after conversing with God, his face shone with the glory of God.

This was a part of the glory of the giving of the Law, and it certainly impressed the people.

Paul then argued from the lesser to the greater: if there was glory in the giving of a Law that brought death, how much more glory is there in a ministry that brings life?

The New Covenant glory means spiritual life, not death (vv. 7–8).

The legalists, like the Judaizers, magnified the glory of the Law and minimized its weaknesses. In his letter to the Galatian churches, Paul pointed out the deficiencies of the Law:

- the Law cannot justify the lost sinner (Gal. 2:16),
- cannot give a sinner righteousness (Gal. 2:21),
- cannot give the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:2),
- cannot give an inheritance (Gal. 3:18),
- cannot give life (Gal. 3:21),
- and cannot give freedom (Gal. 4:8–10).

The glory of the Law is really the glory of a ministry of death.

The New Covenant glory means righteousness, not condemnation (vv. 9-10).

The Law was not given for the purpose of salvation, for there is no salvation through obedience to the Law. The Law produces condemnation and is the mirror that reveals how dirty our faces really are. But we cannot wash our faces in the mirror.

The ministry of the New Covenant produces righteousness and changes lives to the glory of God. Man's greatest need is righteousness, and God's greatest gift is righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. "For if righteousness [comes] by the Law, then Christ is dead in vain" (Gal. 2:21).

The New Covenant glory means righteousness, not condemnation (vv. 9-10).

The person who tries to live under the Law will find himself feeling more and more guilty, and this can produce a feeling of hopelessness and rejection. It is when we trust Christ and live by faith in God's grace that we experience acceptance and joy.

The New Covenant glory is permanent, not temporary (v. 11).

The tense of the verb here is imperative: “that which is passing away.” Paul wrote at a period in history when the ages were overlapping. The New Covenant of Grace had come in, but the temple services were still being carried on, and the nation of Israel was still living under Law.

In A.D. 70, the city of Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed by the Romans, and that would mark the end of the Jewish religious system.

The New Covenant glory is permanent, not temporary (v. 11).

The Judaizers wanted the Corinthian believers to go back under the Law, to “mix” the two Covenants. “Why go back to that which is temporary and fading away?”

Paul asked. “Live in the glory of the New Covenant, which is getting greater and greater.” The glory of the Law is but the glory of past history, while the glory of the New Covenant is the glory of present experience.

As believers, we can be “changed ... from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18), something that the Law can never accomplish.

The New Covenant glory is permanent, not temporary (v. 11).

The glory of the Law was fading in Paul's day and today; that glory is found only in the records in the Bible.

- The nation of Israel has no temple or priesthood. If they did build a temple, there would be no Shekinah glory dwelling in the holy of holies.
- The Law of Moses is a religion with a most glorious past, but it has no glory today. The light is gone; all that remains are shadows (Col. 2:16–17).

The New Covenant glory is permanent, not temporary (v. 11).

Paul has pointed out that the ministry of grace

- is internal (2 Cor. 3:1-3),
- it brings life (2 Cor. 3:4-6), and
- it involves increasing glory (2 Cor. 3:7-11).

He presented one final contrast to prove the superiority of the New Covenant ministry of grace.