

Downward and Outward
II Corinthians on Walking in the Way of Jesus
Part Three: 3.3-18: Formed into the likeness of Jesus

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This summer Sharon and I were with Molly and Dylan and their delightful little year-and-a-half-old son Eli. At one point he and I were walking along and Molly whispered, “Dad,” and pointed behind me. I looked around and there was little Eli walking behind me, following in my footsteps, his hands behind his back just like mine were.

Video of David and Eli walking (volume off)

A couple of days later Dylan caught the same thing happening when we were running an errand and Eli and I were walking down an aisle in Target – me and a mini-me walking side by side.

I showed a picture of this earlier this summer but I’m showing it again today because of the way it brings us so beautifully into our passage for the day.

Today’s passage is about one person imitating another, walking the way they walk. In II Corinthians 3.18, Paul sums up what is clearly one of the most important goals in God’s redemptive work with humanity, which is to make the followers of Jesus more and more like the Jesus they follow.

I think it’s fair to say that over the past half century or so, the evangelical church has oversimplified the gospel, boiling it down to something less than it really is. That simplified version says, “Believe in Jesus. Be forgiven for your sins. Go to heaven.”

It doesn’t say anything about how we are supposed to be *different* – different like Jesus was different. It leaves out the expectation that once we become his followers, it is God’s will and purpose that we would become his imitators, that we would resemble him more and more.

This is how Paul captures it at the end of chapter 3 in II Corinthians, the chapter we’re looking at today.

II Corinthians 3.18

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

As is so often the case, the only way we can understand this particular passage is if we go back and explore the context. So let's walk through what leads up to this verse, and then see what we can conclude about God's project of making us more like Jesus.

Starting in verse 3, Paul writes . . .

II Corinthians 3.3-4

You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence we have through Christ before God.

Remember the Corinthians believers, who have been profoundly shaped by the world around them, are calling the legitimacy of Paul's ministry into question because they are measuring him by the standards of Greek and Roman culture, and they don't see any of the signs of success and power and glory and ambition that they think should mark Paul's ministry.

If Paul were really successful, at the very least he would have shown up among them with a stack of letters in his hands boasting of all his successes in other places.

Paul dismisses that idea and points instead to the lives that have been changed as a result of his work. "*You* are the result of our ministry," he says.

But then he clarifies immediately. You are the result of God's work through me. Even my ability to minister effectively is not the result of my own ability but because God gifted me and empowered me by his Spirit.

II Corinthians 3.5-6

Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. 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.

What's Paul getting at when he talks about a new covenant?

A covenant is a *relationship of mutual commitment* between two people. In this case, between God and his chosen people.

God's first covenant began with one family, Abraham's family, that eventually grew into the Jewish nation. When God begins his relationship with them, he makes this promise in Genesis 12.1-3:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. . . . All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

That’s the promise he will keep with them. In Deuteronomy 10.12-13, he tells them the promise he wants them to keep with him:

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

So, central to the original covenant relationship that God has with his people is their *obedience* to these commands that God has given them. It’s the primary way they demonstrate their devotion to him.

We read about the giving of those commands in Exodus 34, when God asks Moses, who comes along several generations after Abraham, to come to the top of Mount Sinai, where he gives him the commandments that he wants his people to keep.

Exodus 34 says,

²⁷ The LORD said to Moses, “Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” ²⁸ . . . And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments.

But a covenant between fallen human beings and a perfect God that is based on the expectation of obedience is bound to fail. Which it did. The people of God were unable to keep its requirements. That’s why the sacrificial system was so important for the Jewish faith, so the people could atone for their failures and sins through regular sacrifices.

But even as the first covenant was still active, God anticipated that one day there would be a new covenant that would take its place. In Jeremiah 31.31-34, in the Old Testament, he says:

The days are coming . . .
 when I will make a new covenant with my people. . .
 I will put my law in their minds
 and write it on their hearts.
 I will be their God,
 and they will be my people.
 . . . and they will know me,
 all of them, from the least of them to the greatest.

This new covenant would be based not on their obedience or their sacrifices, but based on a sacrifice that God will make when the Son of God came to earth in human form and laid down his life in our place.

Not only to secure our forgiveness but also to bring us into a relationship with God where we know him and live our lives for him, as the Spirit of God equips us to live in a way that reflect God's presence and work.

According to Paul that's exactly what happened when Jesus came and died on the cross. With his death, God instituted his new covenant. Now anyone can find freedom and forgiveness and new life when we put our confidence in Jesus and surrender our lives to him.

Speaking of this old covenant, Paul says

II Corinthians 3.7-8

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, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit – that is, the new covenant – be even more glorious?

Okay, we need to pause again here. Paul assumes we're familiar with the rest of the story in Exodus 34 after Moses received the law from God.

In case you're not, let me flip back there and pick up the story in verse 29:

²⁹ When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him.

³³ [So] when Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face..

This business about the radiance of Moses' face brings us to the really interesting stuff when it comes to understanding the Corinthians' critique of Paul's ministry and what he says here in II Corinthians 3. And it all pivots on how we think about Moses.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing primarily to a Greek and Roman audience. But it turns out that Moses was a really well known figure throughout the ancient world. In fact, he was better known, and more highly respected, than any other person in the Old Testament. But what's significant is what he is known *for*.

In the Old Testament, Moses is known for being more humble than any other person who walked on the planet (Numbers 12.3).

But in the ancient Greek and Roman world, Moses was seen in just the opposite light, revered not for his weakness but for his strength. He was held up as an example of a person of great physical beauty and unsurpassed power who performed great wonders. Think about it! Moses knew the secret name of God, and was able to approach God without fear, and he glowed with the glory of God wherever he went!

In other words, in this Greco-Roman world that elevated power and influence and ambition and charisma and glory and success and beauty, Moses was held up for all the wrong reasons as the epitome of the perfect spiritual leader,

That was not just how the Greeks and Romans saw him. It turns out the Jews in Paul's day had a really similar view. Rather than focusing on his humility, rabbis spoke of him as a "divine man," "as glorious as God himself." He not only saw the glory of God, something no other human being had done. He *possessed* the glory of God, his face glowing from having stood in God's presence.

So the Corinthians look at Moses, with all this wonder-working power and glory, and they look at Paul, with all his struggles and shortcomings and humility. There's no comparison. One's a success, the other's clearly a failure.

Paul couldn't disagree more. They've got it all wrong. Everything about the old covenant was temporary. And it didn't fix anything. All it did was expose our need for God. The new covenant, of which Paul is a servant, is completely different. It brings lasting life.

II Corinthians 3.7-8

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, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?

II Corinthians 3.9-11

If the ministry that brought condemnation was 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 transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

II Corinthians 3.12-13

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 prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away.

Paul insists that the glory of the first covenant, where one person's appearance was changed temporarily – kind of like going to Florida for a week in January and coming

back with a tan that fades about as quickly as you got it – was nothing like the glory of the new covenant, where Jesus himself comes into each one of our lives and changes each one of us permanently, the Spirit of God making it possible not only for us to know God but also for us to reflect God.

But there's a problem. Paul says many of those who were part of the old covenant, especially the Jewish leaders, are having a difficult time recognizing the legitimacy of the new covenant.

They are blind to what God is doing, and they cling to the old law-based way of relating to God. It is like there is a veil over their eyes. As Paul says:

II Corinthians 3.14-15

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.

Paul is sad that many of his fellow Jews are unable to recognize that God is now fulfilling his promises and doing a new thing, introducing the new covenant through Jesus. But that doesn't deny the reality of the new covenant and its power to change lives.

II Corinthians 3.16-17

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.

All of which brings us to the passage with which we began.

II Corinthians 3.18

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

We all, who with unveiled faces
that is, all of us who recognize this new thing that God is doing, and who recognize in Jesus the fulfillment of all God's promises and purposes for humanity, and who open our lives to him in faith, surrendering to his perfect love

We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory,
In Christ, there is now nothing that stands between God and us.
Like Moses, we can know God. We can enjoy God. Each one of us can stand before him face to face and see his glory, his beauty, his splendor.

We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, we are being transformed into his image

This is a central theme in Paul's understanding of the Christian life. In Colossians 3.10, Ephesians 4.24, and Romans 8.29 and elsewhere Paul reminds us this is God's desire and will – that we would more and more take on the family likeness and reflect God our Father and Christ our Lord in who we are and how we live.

That teaching goes straight back to Jesus, who tells us in Matthew 5.43-48 that we are to demonstrate that we are children of God by acting like him, reflecting his generous and gracious heart in the way we relate to others.

we are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory,
or as several familiar translations put it, we are being transformed from glory to glory into the likeness of Christ
over time, more and more faithfully, we will reflect what God is like

which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

This is God's work in us, not our work.

It is the fruit of the Spirit, work with which we are called to cooperate.

So if we are followers of Jesus we are being transformed into his likeness from glory to glory.

But . . . and here's the crucial question, the one about which the Corinthians got so confused. Is it God's project to transform us into the glory of his *greatness*, or into the glory of his *goodness*?

In Exodus 33.18, Moses says to God, "Show me your glory." Meaning presumably, your greatness: your majesty, your splendor, your strength, your power. All those things we see in Exodus 19.16-18 – thunder, lightning, smoke, fire, earthquakes – that Moses believes will help them march with strength into the promised land.

But God has something else in mind. In Exodus 33.19, he answers, "Okay, I'll show you my glory. I will cause all my *goodness* to pass in front of you."

Then In Exodus 34.6-7, he tucks Moses into a crack in the side of the mountain, shielding him from his majestic *nature*, while putting on display his loving *character*.

I am the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

The *nature* of God is his limitless power and perfect strength as the invisible triune God who brought all things into existence. That is the glory of his *nature* from which Moses needs to hide, from which God needs to shield Moses

The *character* of God is his love, his purity, his grace, his kindness, his patience, his generosity, his forgiveness. That is the glory of his *character*, which he wants to reveal to Moses, and which he wants Moses to reveal to the world.

When it comes to our being formed more and more into the likeness of God, the Corinthians then, and many Christians today, get these confused.

Followers of Christ aren't to become godlike in our *nature* – It is not our job to manifest the greatness of God through powerful actions and forceful leadership and commanding ministry and high ambition, like the Corinthians thought we should, but to become like God in our *character* – manifesting the goodness of God through our humble love and other-centered acts of compassion and service.

As you reflect on your life side by side with the life of God, what do you notice?

* * *

So what exactly might this look like, for us to be formed more and more not into the likeness of Moses but into the likeness of Jesus? We don't need to guess. Scriptures tell us that the Spirit of God is transforming our hearts to become like *the heart of Jesus*, and he is conforming our lives so they follow *the example of Jesus*.

So first, our hearts are to beat like his. As we've pointed out in the past, Jesus used only two words to describe the posture of his own heart. We find them in Matthew 11, where Jesus says:

The Heart of Jesus

Take my yoke upon you, for I am *gentle and humble in heart*, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11.29)

Gentle

The first of these words, "gentle," is about how we manage our many concerns for ourselves.

It was a word used in the ancient world to describe tame animals rather than wild ones and benevolent rulers instead of despotic ones.

Being gentle means laying down whatever has us scheming and scrambling to serve ourselves, and releasing and entrusting those things to God, rather than taking things into our own hands and insisting things go our way.

Behind this quality of gentleness, and the thing that allows a gentle person to respond with such freedom from self-concern, is a confidence that God knows best, and he will meet our every need. So we don't need to take the meeting of our needs or desires into our own hands.

Gentleness is the peace remains after I have laid down my self-serving desire, trusting God to be the one who meets all my needs.

Humble

If gentleness is about how I see myself, the other word Jesus uses to describe himself, “humble of heart,” is about how I see others.

It begins with seeing God rightly, in all his glory, and give him the worship that is his due. Then we turn and see others rightly, as people created in God’s glorious image, and give them the honor that is their due.

God being big, I don’t need to be, so when you and I come into the same moment together, I can see myself as the dimmer star, the smaller city, the less important tributary, the weaker army – as the less important of the two of us – all ways this word was used in the ancient world.

“Low” is the word’s literal meaning. Appropriately enough, in ancient Greek medicine this word refers to reduced swelling. Humility is not about thinking less of myself. It’s about thinking of myself less.

Gentle and humble. God intends for the same two qualities that marked Jesus to drive the way my own heart beats. Using the same two words, in Ephesians 4 Paul writes: “Be completely humble and gentle” (Ephesians 4.2).

As ones being transformed into the likeness of Jesus, we are not only called to reflect his heart. We are also to follow his example.

Jesus says,

The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. (Matthew 10.24-25)

Isn’t this imitative dimension at the heart of what it means – or at least should mean – when we call ourselves *followers* of Jesus? More than merely believing in his redemptive sacrifice, we are called to walk – as best we can, God helping us – in his footsteps. As John reminds us:

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. (1 John 2.6)

The New Testament points out at least six different ways that we are called specifically to pattern our lives after the example of Jesus. As I go through them, you might reflect on which of them God seems to be forming in you lately.

The Example of Jesus

Accept (Romans 15.7)
 Love (Ephesians 5.2)
 Serve (John 13.14-15)
 Forgive (Ephesians 4.32)
 Endure mistreatment without retaliating (I Peter 2.21-23)
 Lay down your life (I John 3.16)

Accept: Accept one another, then – remember the word means move toward the other person and draw them in toward you – just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. (Romans 15.7)

Love: Live a life of love, - that is, seek God's best for them, even when it costs you – just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5.2)

Serve: Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. (John 13.14-15)

Forgive: Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4.32)

Endure mistreatment without retaliating: Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps. . . . When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. (I Peter 2.21-23)

Lay down your life: This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. (I John 3.16)

* * *

How do we get our hearts to beat like the heart of Jesus, and our feet to walk in the footsteps of Jesus?

We can't. We can't bring that about on our own strength. But we don't have to. As Paul makes clear, this is God's project in us by his Spirit. Our job is not to bring about the likeness of Jesus in ourselves. Our job is to *cooperate* with the work God is already doing.

So how does that happen? We cooperate, we open our lives to the work of God in us, by walking with him. Simply walking with him.

Beginning each day with him.

Starting into the day by reading the things he wrote to us, listening to the things he says to us. Reading from somewhere in the gospels every day, so a day doesn't go by when we don't see the face and hear the voice and watch the actions of the One to whom we have given over our life.

Walking with him all throughout the day, speaking to him of what is on our hearts, including him in every conversation, turning to him at the beginning and end of each undertaking. Offering our life back to him and inviting his leading. Expressing our yes to whatever he might ask. Spending time with others who are seeking faithfully to walk with him. Showing his love to the people he brings around us.

And ending each day with him. Maybe using the Lectio 365 app to gather our heart up before him and think about how we experienced him throughout the day before we go to sleep. Inviting his presence and comfort as we sleep.

Just walking with him. The more we do that, the more the character of Jesus will show up in us.

You remember that image from earlier in the summer of Eli walking beside me in the Target store, patterning his walking after mine. Over the course of the summer we got to spend lots of time together. Evidently it rubbed off.

Video of Eli and a friend walking (no volume)

A couple of weeks ago, Molly and Dylan sent this picture of Eli and his little buddy Thomas heading to the playground together. Eli, on the left, is setting the pace, and Thomas is following his lead, in more ways than one.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11.1)

This is God's design. That the likeness of Jesus would be formed more and more in us, and then be expressed more and more through us.

May God make that true of each of us as his sons and daughters, as more and more each day he forms his loving character in us, and then uses our lives to put his loving character on display.

We say Amen. Meaning, "Yes, Lord, it is so!" And meaning, "Yes, Lord, please, make it so." Form your likeness in us.

Communion

Earlier in the message we explored the difference between the Old Covenant, which is based on our performance and our works, and the new covenant, which is based on God's grace and what Jesus did for us on the cross, when he offered himself in our place, in order to bring us home to God – not only to secure our forgiveness but to bring us into a relationship with him where we know him and live our lives for him, reflecting God's presence and work.

Before his death Jesus gave us a way to celebrate the arrival of this new covenant and our participation in it.

On the last night he spent with his disciples, Jesus took bread, and he broke it, saying, "This is my body, which is broken for you. Eat this, remembering me."

And at the end of that same meal Jesus took the cup and he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for the forgiveness of many. Drink this, remembering me."

Serving in his name, I invite you, if you are a follower of Jesus, to share in this meal of celebration. Take the elements in your own time, reflecting on what God has opened up for us through Christ. If you need gluten free bread that is available.

And if you are not a follower of Jesus, we're so glad you're here, exploring the faith. I encourage you to use this time to reflect on the claims of Jesus and consider what it would mean if they were true.

Come and celebrate the new covenant.

Notes

Exodus 19

¹⁶ There was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. ... ¹⁸ Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.

Now here is the crucial part of all of this passage.

Glory

Glory in the Greco Roman world

Cicero: gloriole

Means putting the essence of God on display

In a human being, that does not mean becoming divine ourselves, but making the divine nature and character manifest

Exodus 33.18 Show me your His greatness – your weight, your power, your grandeur, your majesty

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Exodus 33.19

Okay, I'll show you my goodness. I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you,

Starting with the end in view

¹⁸ And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

X: walk at Anakeesta with the grandkids, heading out onto wood and rope bridges into the crowns of the trees, now knowing where it ended up

Paul takes us to the end of the Christian life

End meaning where it's going

End meaning what it's for

Us becoming more and more like Jesus.

So many Christians today like the Corinthians have assimilated the construct of the surrounding culture and miss this, thinking that our call is to put the power of God on display rather than the love of God

(Communion?)

Sanctification is a vague theological term. It means “being made holy.” This passage gives clear definition of what it means and how it happens. It means being made into the likeness of Jesus, and it is the work of the Holy Spirit in God’s people over time, to the glory of God. This is God’s central work of transformation in the life of the believer: making us more and more like Jesus.

Beginning: death/separation 3

Goal: reconciliation/relationship 5

Being made new 5

No longer living for ourselves but for him 5

He is Lord 4

From glory to glory like Jesus 3

Old

Glory fading

Falling short – condemnation/death

Moses

veiled

New

Glory lasting

Entering in – freedom/life

Jesus

Seen clearly

Salvation into relationship, not into heaven

Sanctification into Christlikeness by the Spirit, not into rules/obedience by my strength

Video of Eli walking beside me

Video of Eli walking beside his friend

One approach

Lay out the path of the Christian life

Salvation and sanctification/holiness

Made for relationship, brought into relationship, no longer live for self

Then become more and more like him – holy, distinctive in the way God is distinctive

Lay out the structure of II Corinthians 3

Moses: glory that fades, kingdom, glory that never fades

Law leads to awareness of need for God

Gospel leads to God I Peter 3 brings us home to God

Exodus 19

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Exodus 33.19

Okay, I'll show you my goodness. I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you,

Like king, like subject. How beautifully that pattern is captured in Isaiah 32, where what is true of the king becomes true of the leaders under him as well:

Isaiah 32.1-2

Look, a righteous king is coming!
And honest princes will rule under him.
Each one will be like a shelter from the wind
and a refuge from the storm,
like streams of water in the desert
and the shadow of a great rock in a parched land.