

You're likely to have heard of a Broadway show called *The Phantom of the Opera*. But you may not know that it's the longest running show on Broadway. It opened 32 years ago on January 26, 1988, and is still playing at the Majestic. I'm sure most of you are familiar with the story. It all takes place in Paris. It's about a man named Erik who lives in shame and darkness and isolation in the cellars of an opera house and wears a mask because of facial disfigurement. But he falls in love with a young performer named Christine, and he becomes obsessed with her. At one point, he even dares to take his mask off so she can see his disfigured face, but unfortunately, she's repelled at the sight of him, which drives him deeper into hiding and shame.

What's funny is there is a story very much like this in the Bible. In Exodus 34, there's a story about Moses and the Israelites. You might recall Moses spent a lot of time up on Mt Sinai in the presence of God. It was up on Sinai that he received the Ten Commandments. It was there he pleaded with God not to destroy the Israelites after they made the golden calf. And it was there Moses was able to catch a glimpse of God's glory. The writer says Moses spoke with God "face to face."

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. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai. When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever he entered the Lord's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the Lord. Exodus 34:29-35

So Moses had this glory or radiance on his face from being in the presence of God. That caused a good deal of fear among the people. I mean, God's glory isn't something you deal with casually. They were afraid. But Moses wants to speak to them; to pass on the commands of the Lord. And then we read about this veil he wore. We can all relate to this, right? I mean, we're all getting used to wearing masks! But Moses wore his for a different

reason. At first glance, it appears Moses wore the veil to alleviate the fears of the people but notice it says he only wore the veil after he spoke with the people and before he met with the Lord. So he talks to God, and the veil comes off, and it stays off when he comes down the mountain and talks to the Israelites. All the while his face is radiant. But when he leaves the people, he puts the veil back over his face until he goes back to speak with the Lord.

So what's Moses covering up and why? What's he so ashamed of? To answer that question, we have to go to the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians. In chapter 3, Paul has been defending his ministry. He says he's a minister of the New Covenant, rather than the old one. The Old Covenant was the arrangement made between God and the Israelites. God gave them his law on stone tablets through Moses and commanded them to keep it to have life. The Old Covenant is such that, when it comes to living up to God's standards, everything is up to us; God gives us the rules, and it's up to us to keep them. But the New Covenant is different. It's bound up with the cross of Jesus Christ whereby our sins are forgiven, and we receive from God as a free gift the righteousness of Christ; there's no condemnation because, in Christ, we're declared not guilty. Furthermore, in the New Covenant, we're given the Holy Spirit who writes God's law on our hearts and empowers us to live in a way that pleases God. In the New Covenant, everything comes from God, and nothing comes from us.

A Greater Glory

And, as we'll see, this helps explain what was going on with Moses and his shining face. Look at 2 Corinthians 3:7-11.

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? 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! 2 Corinthians 3:7-11

The key word in this section is glory. It's repeated ten times. The glory and radiance of the New Covenant far outshines the old. The Old Covenant did have a certain glory. That's why Moses'

face was shining when he came down from the mountain. I mean, he'd been with God, who is glorious. And he'd received God's law, which reflected God's glory.

But Paul says if the Old Covenant had some glory, the New Covenant has much more. In fact, the glory of the New Covenant is so much greater that the glory of the old is now obsolete. My great grandfather was a blacksmith at the turn of the century in San Francisco. He made wagon wheels. But after the automobile was invented, and more and more people bought cars, his trade became obsolete. Nobody needed wagon wheels anymore because the glory of the automobile surpassed the glory of horse-drawn carriages. In the same way, the glory of the New Covenant surpasses the old and makes it obsolete.

We see this in the effects each of these covenants have on us. Paul calls the Old Covenant, "the ministry that brought death." Later, he says it "brought condemnation." The Old Covenant always results in condemnation because no one can live up to its demands. It's not that the law is bad, but we're bad, and so the harder we try to keep it, the more we fail. The result is spiritual death (alienation from God). But the New Covenant is called "the ministry that brings righteousness." God gives us his righteousness as a gift. He accepts us based on what his Son has done on our behalf. If that which condemns and kills has glory, how much more glory does that which brings righteousness and life have?

The New Covenant also surpasses the old in its staying power. In verse 7, Paul mentions the glory on Moses' face was transitory. It was fading away. We didn't know that from our reading of Exodus 34, but Paul knew. In contrast to that, he says the glory of the New Covenant lasts; it doesn't fade away. What would you rather have, something that fades away or something that lasts?

Hiding the Fading Glory

This leads Paul to reveal a secret about Moses we didn't know. It has to do with his veil. "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" (vv. 12-13). The word bold really means open. It was used to describe someone whose words and actions are open for all to see. Like you're an open book.

Paul is hinting at the fact that his critics in Corinth were not open; they were deceptive. To be open requires courage and confidence. This is where the idea of boldness comes in. It's not easy at times to be open. Our fears and insecurities get in the way. But this quality of openness and boldness is true of those who live under the New Covenant because our confidence isn't in our abilities; rather, it's in God.

Paul then uses Moses as a negative illustration. Moses wasn't bold; he wasn't open. He had an ulterior motive in wearing that veil—he wanted to hide the reality that the glory on his

face was fading away. Again, the fading glory symbolized that the Old Covenant was fading away; it wasn't permanent; it was becoming obsolete. The Old Covenant was never meant to be a permanent arrangement; it was designed to show us our depravity and inability to be righteous on our own. It was designed to prepare us for Christ. Moses sensed this, but he didn't want to let on to the people. They might doubt his leadership. So he wore the veil.

Under the New Covenant, Paul was open and bold, while under the Old Covenant, Moses was closed and veiled. When we live under the Old Covenant today, we're forced to do the same thing Moses did. We put on a veil. A veil is anything we do to hide the reality of the fading glory of the law.

The law was designed to bring us to that point of helplessness where we know we're not able to keep it. But instead of acknowledging that, we cover up our inadequacy. We try to pretend all is well. We try harder to be what deep down we know we can never be—like the aging movie star who tries to cover up his or her age with make-up or face-lifts. When we look to ourselves as the source of our confidence and adequacy, we'll always live in fear of being found out. We will always try to prove to ourselves and others and maybe even to God that we're something that we know deep down we can never be by ourselves.

In a 2016 interview, actor Ben Affleck reflected on the pressure to hide our broken areas. He said, "I think it's interesting how we manage the best version of ourselves, despite our flaws and our weaknesses and our tendencies to do the wrong thing." The article noted, "Affleck has also realized that for all of his Hollywood success, some part of him will always feel like a relentless striver who must prove, through his work, that he has a right to be there."

That's what it's like to live under the tyranny of the law. We hide our flaws and weaknesses. We become relentless strivers who must prove ourselves. But under the New Covenant, we're free to be open about who and what we are. Sometimes that's not a very pretty picture, but under the New Covenant, we're accepted, and we're being changed by the reality of the living God who's at work in our lives.

The sad thing is many of us, who ought to be living under the freedom of the New Covenant, live as if we were under the old. We, who have been accepted in Christ, can fall into this same trap by trying to hide the reality of our inadequacy to live up to God's standard.

Christians wear veils too. It usually starts with a desire to please God. We want to be holy; we want to be loving. And so, we set up some guidelines for our behavior that will help us live this way. Some of these guidelines are right from the Bible—don't steal, don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't get drunk with wine, and so forth. Sometimes we go even further and add others of

our own just to be safe: no dancing, no drinking, read your Bible every day, tithe, and the list goes on. The focus of our Christian life becomes keeping the list rather than receiving the grace of God.

That usually results in one of two things. If our list is too demanding and unrealistic, we end up living in a perpetual state of defeat. There are a lot of defeated Christians because deep down, they know they're not keeping their list. But there's another thing that can happen, and it's even worse. You can get pretty good at keeping your list. You can begin to feel good about yourself. You can become proud. You're careful to give all the glory to God, but there is a subtle pride that develops in your spirit, which will reveal itself outwardly sooner or later. It usually comes out in a judgmental, critical spirit towards others who don't live up to your standards. And worst of all, we're blind to the one thing that God hates the most—pride. Do you see how subtle it can be?

In 1927, the director Cecil B. DeMille cast British-born actor H. B. Warner as Jesus in his famous silent film, *King of Kings*. Warner was kept on a short leash during the filming of *King of Kings*. Why? Because DeMille was concerned that any behavior by the lead actor deemed inconsistent with Christ's image would result in negative publicity for the film.

As a result, DeMille enforced strict measures to ensure Warner kept up a good Jesus-image. Both Warner and his co-star Dorothy Cumming (who played Mary, the mother of Jesus) had to sign agreements that barred them from appearing in film roles that might compromise their "holy" screen images for five years. During the filming, DeMille separated Warner from the others, even forcing him to eat alone every day. Warner couldn't play cards, go to ballgames, ride in a convertible, or go swimming.

Unfortunately, the regimen of rules and regulations didn't make Warner more holy. Instead, all of the pressure to be Christlike drove Warner over the edge. During the production of *King of Kings*, rather than act more like Jesus, Warner relapsed into his addiction to alcohol.

Turning to Christ and Removing the Veil

Honestly, for many Christians in many churches, this is the normal state of affairs. We hide. We pretend to be something we're not. You'd think we'd see through it all. In fact, you'd think the Israelites would see through it in Moses. But Paul says their minds were hardened, and they wore a veil of their own.

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. vv. 14-16

Paul shifts the image from the veil over Moses' face to the veil over people's hearts as a spiritual barrier. The people were able to see the law was only temporary, a fading glory. It wasn't all Moses' fault; they'd become blind and dulled to the reality that the law couldn't save them. The same veil lies over the reading of the Old Covenant to this day. Sometimes we wonder, "How can the Jewish people fail to see the reality of Christ in the Old Testament? How can they fail to see in their own Bible that the law never saved Israel?" It's because a veil lies over their hearts.

Yet, Paul always held out hope for individual Jews like himself. He says when anyone turns to Christ, the veil is removed, just like Moses in Exodus 34. Whenever Moses went into the Lord's presence, he took the veil off. In the same way, today, when someone turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Turning to the Lord means coming to Jesus for salvation. It's a turning away from trying to save ourselves by being good and keeping the law and instead turning towards Christ as our Redeemer and Savior. That's how the veil is removed, by turning to the Lord.

Free to be Transformed

And when that happens, we're set free. In verse 17, Paul says, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." When we turn to the Lord, we experience His Spirit in our lives. The indwelling of the Spirit is the greatest blessing of the New Covenant. He brings us freedom because God has accepted us in Christ. We're no longer in bondage to a law system which keeps us guilty and condemned. We're free to be ourselves before both God and others. We don't have to wear a veil! We can come into the presence of God, confessing our sin, trusting that through Christ, we're fully accepted. We can stand before others, without any false fronts, acknowledging our inadequacies, trusting the Spirit of God is changing us from the inside out.

Look what happens when the veil is removed, according to verse 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." When the veil is removed, we're free to be transformed.

The word he uses here is one from which we get our word metamorphosis. It means to be changed into another form. The New Covenant isn't about us trying to change ourselves, but it's not about us just staying the same either. Freedom means we can become what we long for. Who wants to stay the same? As believers, we want to be more holy, more loving, more like Jesus. But how does that happen? Here is one of the clearest statements on this in all of Scripture.

Paul says, "We all, who with unveiled faces..." He's not just talking about Moses. Now anyone who, through Christ, has taken the veil off is free to be transformed. It doesn't matter what you've done or who you are; if you've turned to Christ, you can be

transformed. He also tells us what we're being transformed into: "We're being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory." He's talking about the glorious image of God. God wants to make us more like him. Paul puts this in a way to show it's an ongoing process. It doesn't happen overnight. It happens gradually.

Notice also who does the changing. We don't change ourselves; we're "being transformed" by someone else. At the end of the verse, he says this "comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." The Spirit of the Lord is the One who changes us.

And all of this takes place as we "contemplate the Lord's glory." The word means to look intently into a mirror. Moses beheld the Lord, and his face was changed; we beheld the Lord, and we're transformed. The idea is we have an ongoing, unimpeded, face to face relationship with God through the work of the Spirit in our lives.

What a contrast to how we usually think about change. Some of us believe the key to change is knowledge. We live in the information age, and so often, we think change will take place if we can only access and master more information. Some of us believe the key to change is therapy. If I can just learn more about my past, I could change this or that about myself. Some of us believe the key to change is self-discipline. If I could just be more disciplined, I'd be a different person. These all can be good things, they can improve our lives, but they can't transform us at the core of our being into the image of God. That only happens as we take the veil off and behold the Lord.

How do we do that? Obviously, we can't see God with our eyes. So what does he mean? If you follow the logic of the passage, "contemplating the Lord's glory" means turning to and trusting in Jesus, keeping our hearts and minds focused on him; staying connected to Him; abiding in Him. It's as we do this and experience His living presence in our lives through the Spirit that we're changed. You might say we become what we look at. If you look at Jesus, you're going to become like Jesus.

Remember how Peter saw Jesus walking on water, and he wanted to try it too? Jesus said, "Come on, Peter!" Peter got out of the boat and started walking on water. But then he started looking around at the wind and the waves, and as soon as he did this, he began to sink. What was the problem? He took his eyes off Jesus! It's that simple. Keep your eyes on Jesus, and not only will you not sink, but you'll be changed forever.

I like the way Mike Yaconelli describes this.

Spirituality isn't a formula; it's not a test. It's a relationship. Spirituality isn't about competency; it's about intimacy. Spirituality isn't about perfection; it's about connection. The way of the spiritual life begins where we are now in the mess of our lives. Accepting the reality of our broken, flawed lives is the beginning of spirituality, not because the spiritual life will remove our flaws, but because we let go of seeking perfection and instead seek God, the One who's present in the tangledness of our lives. Spirituality isn't about being fixed; it's about God being present in the mess of our unfixeness.

There is a powerful scene towards the end of *The Phantom of the Opera*. Erik kidnaps Christine and tries to force her to marry him. If she refuses, he'll blow up the entire opera house. Christine refuses until she realizes if she doesn't marry him, everyone in the opera house will be killed, including the man she loves.

So she agrees to marry Erik. When Erik is alone with her, he lifts his mask to kiss her on her forehead, and out of pity, she actually kisses him back. Erik reveals that he's never received a kiss, not even from his mother, nor has he ever been allowed to give one. He's overcome with emotion and lets Christine go, telling her to go and marry the boy she loves.

I love that scene because it communicates a powerful truth about the Gospel. When we turn to Jesus Christ and trust in him, we encounter perfect love. Because Christ has made us clean, our mask comes off, and we're fully embraced by the Father. And through the power of His Spirit, the disfigurement of our heart is transformed into His likeness. That's the power of the New Covenant. But we have to take the mask off. We have to stop pretending we're something we're not. We have to chuck our list, invite Jesus into the mess of our broken lives, and let him transform us.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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