

## Bold Ministers

Lesson for June 9, 2024

### Unit I: Experiencing Hope

#### Adult Topic: Reflecting God's Spirit

**Scriptural Background:** 2 Corinthians 3:1-18

**Printed Text:** 2 Corinthians 3:5-18

**Key verse:** “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.” 2 Corinthians 3:18, NIV)

Hugh Lattimer once preached before King Henry VIII. Henry was greatly displeased by the boldness in the sermon and ordered Lattimer to preach again on the following Sunday and apologize for the offence he had given.

The next Sunday, after reading his text, he thus began his sermon: “Hugh Lattimer, dost thou know before whom thou art this day to speak? To the high and mighty monarch, the king's most excellent majesty, who can take away thy life, if thou offendest. Therefore, take heed that thou speakest not a word that may displease. But then consider well, Hugh, dost thou not know from whence thou comest – upon Whose message thou art sent? Even by the great and mighty God, Who is all-present and Who beholdeth all thy ways and Who is able to cast thy soul into hell! Therefore, take care that thou deliverest thy message faithfully.” He then preached the same sermon he had preached the preceding Sunday – and with considerably more energy.

M. Cocoris, *Evangelism, A Biblical Approach*, Moody, 1984

### Unifying Lesson Principle

People become defensive and retreat when their credentials are challenged. How do we proclaim truth boldly in the face of such challenges? Paul declared that he was able to speak with greater boldness because of the evidence of believers’ transformed lives. (*Sunday School Commentary, 2023-2024*, Townsend Press, p. 363)

### Key Terms

- 1. Boldness** (verse 12) – fearless before danger; intrepid. Boldness is a mark of Spirit-empowerment (Acts 2:14-41) and is granted in response to prayer amidst persecution (Acts 3:41). Paul prays to increase in boldness (Ephesians 6:20, Colossians 4:4). And in each instance, boldness is not a general character attribute but a specific grace for proclaiming the Word.

2. **Covenant** (verse 6) – A written agreement or promise usually under seal between two or more parties especially for the performance of some action. In the Bible, an agreement between God and his people, in which God makes promises to his people and, usually, requires certain conduct from them.
3. **Produced** (verse 7) – Came into being; made ready; bore. Brought into life, being or view; yielded.
4. **Respect** (verse 10) – A part, share, portion. To have regard to, in relation or connection; to relate to. The treaty particularly respects our commerce. To view or consider with some degree of reverence; to esteem as possessed of real worth.
5. **Righteousness** (verse 9) – Morally right or justifiable. Purity of heart and rectitude of life; conformity of heart and life to the divine law. Righteousness, as used in Scripture and theology, in which it is chiefly used, is nearly equivalent to holiness, comprehending holy principles and affections of heart, and conformity of life to the divine law. It includes all we call justice, honesty, and virtue, with holy affections; in short, it is true religion. Applied to God, the perfection or holiness of his nature; exact rectitude; faithfulness.
6. **Sufficient** (verse 5) – Enough to meet the needs of a situation or a proposed end. The state of being adequate to the end proposed.

### **Lesson Background**

Paul wrote to Gentile Christians living in Corinth, sending this letter a few years after personally founding the church in that city. Paul had also written at least one other known previous letter to this church: the epistle of 1 Corinthians. It is also possible that Paul wrote at least one other letter to this church, which is no longer in existence (1 Corinthians 5:9). These believers had responded positively to Paul's previous writing, yet appeared to continue to have some problems, particularly in the area of false apostles (2 Corinthians 11:13).

Second Corinthians includes thirteen chapters which address four major sections. After a brief greeting in 2 Corinthians 1:1–11, Paul shifts attention to a discussion of his own ministry (2 Corinthians 1:12–7:16). He addresses his personal plans in chapter 1, followed by addressing a particular "offender" in 2 Corinthians 2:5–11. In 2 Corinthians 2:12–6:13 Paul addresses various aspects of his ministry, especially emphasizing the many trials he had faced (2 Corinthians 4:8–18) and his faithful conduct (2 Corinthians 6:1–13). Paul encourages these believers to live distinctly from unbelievers, including in marriage relationships (2 Corinthians 6:14–18). Paul then discusses the difference between worldly, despairing grief, and "godly sorrow," which ultimately leads a person closer to God (2 Corinthians 7:1–16).

Eager for the Corinthians to understand that he is not promoting himself, Paul wants them to look at themselves to validate his role as an apostle of Jesus. Their own lives should serve as all the evidence they need that Paul delivered not himself but Christ to them. After all, they have become living, breathing letters of recommendation for him and his co-workers. They are letters written by Christ with the Holy Spirit instead of ink on human hearts instead of tablets (2 Corinthians 3:1–3).

Paul insists this is not because of his own strength and skill. He and his friends are not "sufficient" to carry out this work. They are not specially qualified, in and of themselves. They're not boosted by their own power (2 Corinthians 3:4).

## Lesson in Depth

### I. God-given Confidence (2 Corinthians 3:5-6)

**Not that we are sufficient of ourselves:** Paul doesn't consider himself **sufficient** for the great task of changing lives for Jesus. Only Jesus is sufficient for such a big job. Some people refuse to be used by God because they think of themselves as "not ready," but in a sense, we are never ready or worthy. If we were, the sufficiency would be in ourselves and not from God.

"Brethren, if Paul is not sufficient of himself, what are you and I? Where are you... Do you indulge the dream of self-sufficiency? Be ashamed of your folly in the presence of a great man who knew what he said, and who spoke under the direction of the Spirit of God, and wrote deliberately, 'Not that we are sufficient of ourselves.'" (Spurgeon)

"Our sufficiency is of God; let us practically enjoy this truth. We are poor, leaking vessels, and the only way for us to keep full is to put our pitcher under the perpetual flow of boundless grace. Then, despite its leakage, the cup will always be full to the brim." (Spurgeon)

**Ministers of the new covenant:** The idea of a **new covenant** was prophesied in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 31:31) and put into practice by Jesus (Luke 22:19-20).

The ancient Greek word for **covenant** (*diatheke*) had the ordinary meaning of a "last will and testament." Paul's use of the word reinforces the sovereignty of God, because it is not a negotiated settlement, but a divine decree.

The word **covenant** describes "An 'arrangement' made by one party with plenary power, which the other party may accept or reject, but cannot alter... A covenant offered by God to man was no 'compact' between two parties coming together on equal terms." (Moulton and Milligan)

This **new covenant** presents the terms by which we can have a relationship with God, centered on Jesus and His work for us.

**Not of the letter but of the Spirit:** When Paul contrasts **the letter** and **the Spirit**, he isn't favoring "experience" over "the word," nor is he favoring allegorical interpretation over a literal understanding of the Bible. Rather Paul shows the superiority of the **new covenant** over the old covenant.

The **letter** is the law in its outward sense, written on tablets of stone. The letter of the law came by the old covenant. It was good in itself, but it gave us no power to serve God, and it did not change our heart; it simply told us what to do. Paul can say **the letter kills** because the law, exposing our guilt, “**kills**” us before God. The law thoroughly and completely establishes our guilt.

Paul expresses this point well in Romans 7:5-6: *For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.*

The indwelling **Spirit** then becomes for us a law written on our hearts. He is in us to guide us and be our “law.” It isn’t that the Holy Spirit *replaces* the written law, but *completes* and *fulfills* the work of the written law in our hearts. **The Spirit gives life**, and with this spiritual life, we can live out the law of God.

Therefore, we can’t throw away or neglect our Bibles (which some might say is **the letter**) because now we have **the Spirit**. Instead, **the Spirit** makes us alive to **the letter**, *fulfilling* and *completing* the work of **the letter** in us. We also shouldn’t think this is permission to live our Christian life on experiences or mystical interpretations of the Bible. Experiences and allegories in the Bible have their place, but each must be proved true and supported by studying the literal meaning of the Bible. **The Spirit** and **the letter** are not enemies, but friends. They don’t work against each other, and one is incomplete without the other.

## II. **Eternal Glory** (2 Corinthians 3:7-13)

**The ministry of death:** Was it wrong to call the old covenant **the ministry of death**? No, because that is what the law does to us: It slays us as guilty sinners before God so that we can be resurrected by the new covenant. It isn’t that the problem was with the law, but with us: *The sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death.* (Romans 7:5)

Trapp on **the ministry of death:** “David was the voice of the law awarding death to sin, ‘He shall surely die.’ Nathan was the voice of the gospel awarding life to repentance for sin, ‘Thou shalt not die.’”

**Was glorious:** There was glory associated with the giving of the law and the old covenant. At that time, Mount Sinai was surrounded with smoke; there were earthquakes, thunder, lightning, a trumpet blast from heaven, and the voice of God Himself (Exodus 19:16-20:1). Most of all, the glory of the old covenant was shown in **the face of Moses** and the **glory of his countenance**.

“And although the gospel came not into the world as the law, with thunder, lightning, and earthquakes; yet that was ushered in by angels, foretelling the birth and office of John the Baptist, and of Christ; by the great sign of the virgin’s conceiving and bringing forth a Son; by a voice from heaven, proclaiming Christ the Father’s only begotten Son, in whom he was well pleased.” (Poole)

**The face of Moses:** Exodus 34:29-35 describes how Moses put a veil over his face after speaking to the people. As glorious as the radiant face of Moses was, it was a fading glory: **which glory was passing away**. The glory of the old covenant shining through the face of Moses was a fading glory, but the glory of the new covenant endures *without* fading.

**How will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious:** If the *old* covenant, which brought *death* had this glory, we should expect *greater glory* in the new covenant, which brings **the ministry of the Spirit** and life.

The old covenant was **a ministry of condemnation**, but the new covenant is **the ministry of righteousness**. The old covenant **is passing away**, but the new covenant **remains**. No wonder the new covenant is **much more glorious!**

ii. The old covenant **had glory**, but the glory of the new covenant far outshines it, just as the sun always outshines the brightest moon. Compared to the new covenant, the old covenant **had no glory** because of **the glory that excels** in the new covenant.

**Therefore, since we have such hope:** Since our hope is in a more glorious covenant, we can have a more glorious **hope**. Because of this hope, Paul can **use great boldness of speech**. The old covenant restricted and separated men from God; the new covenant brings us to God and enables us to come *boldly* to Him.

**Unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face:** Even Moses did not have real boldness under the old covenant. A **veil** is not a “bold” thing to wear; it is a barrier and something to hide behind. Moses lacked boldness (compared to Paul) because the covenant that he ministered under was fading away and fading in glory.

**So that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away:** From reading the account in Exodus 34:29-35, one might first get the impression that Moses wore a veil after his meetings with God so that the people wouldn’t be afraid to come near him; the veil was to protect *them* from seeing the shining face of Moses. Here Paul explains the real purpose of the veil: not to hide the shining face of Moses, but to hide the *diminishing* glory of his face because the glory was fading. The **passing** glory of the old covenant contrasts with the enduring glory of the new covenant.

**Could not look:** Since the veil hid the face of Moses, the children of Israel couldn’t see *any* of the glory from his face. Therefore, the contrast isn’t only between **passing** glory and enduring glory, but also between *concealed* glory and *revealed* glory.

### III. **Reflected Glory** (2 Corinthians 3:14-18)

**For until this day the same veil remains unlifted:** Paul says that most of the Jews of his day could not see that the glory of Moses' ministry faded in comparison to the ministry of Jesus. Because the **veil remains unlifted**, they can't see that the glory of Moses' ministry has faded and they should now look to Jesus. Since the **same veil** that hid Moses' face now **lies on their heart**, they still think there is something superior or more glorious in the ministry of Moses.

**Nevertheless, when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away:** Paul could say of his fellow Jews that **a veil lies on their heart**, but he could also say that the veil can be taken away in Jesus. Paul knew this well because he was once veiled to the glory and superiority of Jesus.

Many Christians with a heart to preach to their Jewish friends wonder why it is rarely so simple as just showing them that Jesus is the Messiah. This is because **a veil lies on their heart**. Unless God does a work in them so they turn to the Lord and have the veil taken away, they will never see the fading glory of Moses' covenant and the surpassing glory of Jesus and the new covenant.

Of course, it could be said that the Jews are not the only ones with **a veil... on their heart**. Gentiles also have "veils" that separate them from seeing Jesus and His work for us clearly, and Jesus is more than able to take those veils away. This points to the essential need of *prayer* in evangelism. It has been rightly said that it is more important to talk to God about men than it is to talk to men about God, but we can do both of these important works.

**Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.**

**The Lord is the Spirit:** From the context of Exodus 34:34, we see that when Paul says **the Lord is the Spirit**, he means that the Holy Spirit is God, just as Jesus and the Father are God.

**Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.** Paul's thinking follows like this: When Moses went into God's presence, he had the liberty to take off the veil; the presence of the Lord gave him this liberty. We have the Holy Spirit, who is the Lord. We live in the Spirit's presence because He is given to us under the new covenant. So, just as Moses had the liberty to relate to God without the veil in the presence of the Lord, so we have **liberty** because of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We should also consider what Paul is *not* saying. He is not giving license to any Pentecostal or Charismatic excess because **where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty**. We have great liberty in our relationship with God through what Jesus did and through what the Holy Spirit is doing, but we never have the **liberty** to disobey what the Spirit says in the word of God. That is a perversion of true liberty, not a Spirit-led liberty.

**There is liberty:** Paul really has in mind the *liberty of access*. He is building on what he wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:12: *We use great boldness of speech*. Boldness is a word that belongs with **liberty**. Because of the great work of the Holy Spirit in us through the new covenant, we have a bold, liberated relationship with God.

“A liberty from the yoke of the law, from sin, death, hell; but the liberty which seemeth here to be chiefly intended, is a liberty from that blindness and hardness which is upon men’s hearts, until they have received the Holy Spirit.” (Poole)

**We all with unveiled face:** Paul invites every Christian to a special, glorious intimacy with God. This is a relationship and transforming power that is not the property of just a few privileged Christians. It can belong to **all**, to everyone who has an **unveiled face**.  
i. How do we get an **unveiled face**? *When one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away* (2 Corinthians 3:16). If we will turn to the Lord, He will take away the veil and we can be one of the “**we all**.”

**Beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord:** We can see **the glory of the Lord**, but we cannot see His glory perfectly. **A mirror** in the ancient world did not give nearly as good a reflection as our mirrors do today. Ancient mirrors were made of polished metal, and gave a clouded, fuzzy, somewhat distorted image. Paul says, “We can see **the glory of the Lord**, but we can’t see it perfectly yet.”

There may be another thought here also: “Now as *mirrors*, among the Jews, Greeks, and Romans, were made of highly polished *metal*, it would often happen, especially in strong light, that the face would be greatly *illuminated* by this strongly *reflected* light; and to this circumstance the apostle seems here to allude.” (Clarke)

**Are being transformed:** As we behold the glory of God, we will be **transformed**. God will change our lives and change us from the inside out. Though the old covenant had its glory, it could never transform lives through the law. God uses the new covenant to make us **transformed** people, not just *nice* people.

Everyone wants to know, “How can I change?” Or, everyone wants to know, “How can *they* change?” The best and most enduring change comes into our life when we are **transformed** by time spent with the Lord. There are other ways to change, such as guilt, willpower, or coercion, but none of these methods bring change that is as deep and lasts as long as the transformation that comes by the Spirit of God as we spend time in the presence of the Lord.

Yet, it requires something: **beholding**. The word means more than a casual look; it means to make a careful study. We all have something to behold, something to study. We can be transformed by the glory of the Lord, but only if we will *carefully study* it.  
**Into the same image:** As we look into “God’s mirror,” we are changed **into the same image** of the Lord. When we spend time **beholding** the glory of the God of love, grace, peace, and righteousness, we will see a transforming growth in love, grace, peace, and righteousness.

Of course, this is how you can know someone is really spending time with the Lord: They **are being transformed into the same image**. However, much depends on what we “see” when we look into “God’s mirror.” In this analogy, “God’s mirror” is not a mirror that shows us what *we are* as much as it shows us what *we will become*, and what we will become is based on our picture of who God is. If we have a false picture of God, we will see that false picture in God’s “mirror” and will be transformed into that **same image** – much to our harm, both for now and eternity.

Not everyone sees the truth when they look into the mirror. Here is a current example to illustrate the point:

Thirty-year-old David gets up every morning, and his morning routine only gets as far as the bedroom mirror, where he sees a horribly distorted face – a crooked, swollen nose covered with scars and a bulging eye. The pain from his deformities made him quit college and move in with his parents ten years ago. Since then, he rarely leaves his room, afraid to let anyone see him. His four cosmetic surgeries have done nothing to help his condition because the problems with David’s appearance are only in his *mind*. Experts call it *body dysmorphic disorder*, or BDD. It causes people to imagine themselves as deformed, ugly people when they really have a normal appearance. Psychiatrists call it a hidden epidemic, and one psychiatrist said, “Patients are virtually coming out of the woodwork. I’m meeting with one new patient each week.” Most BDD sufferers are convinced the problem is with their face. Those afflicted live with such an overwhelming sense of shame that they can barely function. One young teacher in Boston tried to continue her job but often ran out in the middle of class, afraid that her imagined hideous appearance showed through her thick makeup. A Denver businessman called his mother from the office 15 times a day for reassurance that he did not look grotesque and spent hours in the bathroom stall with a pocket mirror trying to figure out a way to improve his appearance. Some try to cope with harmful rituals, such as cutting themselves to “bleed” the damaged area. BDD sufferers are usually convinced that the problem is with their body, not their mind. They don’t want to see anyone but plastic surgeons and dermatologists for their problem.

Thankfully, we don’t have to be in bondage to a false image of ourselves or of God. When we **behold** the picture of God as He is in truth, we will be transformed into His image. This is God’s great design in our salvation, *for whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son* (Romans 8:29). Calvin speaks to this great design of God: “That the image of God, which has been defaced by sin, may be repaired within us... the progress of this restoration is continuous through the whole of life, because it is little by little that God causes His glory to shine forth in us.”

**Are being transformed:** This work of transformation is a process. We are **being** transformed; the work isn’t complete yet, and no one should expect it to be complete in themselves or in others. No one comes away from one incredible time with the Lord perfectly **transformed**.



**From glory to glory:** The work of transformation is a continual progression. It works *from glory to glory*. It doesn't have to work from *backsliding to glory to backsliding to glory*. God's work in our lives can be a continual progression, **from glory to glory**.

**By the Spirit of the Lord:** With these last words, Paul emphasizes two things. First, this access to God and His transforming presence is ours by the new covenant, because it is through the new covenant we are given **the Spirit of the Lord**. Secondly, this work of transformation really is God's work in us. It happens **by the Spirit of the Lord**, not by the will or effort of man. We don't *achieve* or *earn* spiritual transformation by **beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord**. We simply put ourselves in a place where **the Spirit of the Lord** can transform us.

### Lesson Summary

2 Corinthians 3:5-18 is a rich passage in the New Testament that offers several key lessons, primarily focusing on the themes of sufficiency in Christ, the contrast between the old and new covenants, and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. Here are some of the main lessons from this passage:

#### 1. Sufficiency in God (Verses 5-6)

- **Dependence on God:** Paul emphasizes that our adequacy comes from God, not from ourselves. This teaches the importance of humility and recognizing that our abilities and sufficiency are derived from God.
- **Ministry of the Spirit:** The new covenant, mediated by the Spirit, brings life, unlike the old covenant, which brought condemnation due to the inability of people to keep the Law perfectly.

#### 2. Contrast Between the Old and New Covenants (Verses 7-11)

- **Glory of the New Covenant:** While the old covenant had glory, it is surpassed by the far greater glory of the new covenant. This underscores the superiority of the new covenant established through Jesus Christ.
- **Temporary vs. Permanent:** The old covenant was temporary and fading, whereas the new covenant is permanent and lasting, signifying the eternal nature of Christ's work.

#### 3. Transformation Through the Spirit (Verses 12-18)

- **Boldness in Ministry:** Knowing the surpassing glory of the new covenant gives believers boldness to proclaim the gospel.
- **Veil Removed in Christ:** The metaphor of the veil, which prevented the Israelites from seeing the fading glory of Moses' face, represents the spiritual blindness removed through Christ. In Christ, the veil is taken away, allowing believers to see clearly.
- **Freedom in the Spirit:** "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." This freedom is not just from the law but also from the power of sin and death, bringing liberation and life.
- **Transformation into Christ's Image:** Believers are being transformed into the likeness of Christ with ever-increasing glory. This transformation is a continual process facilitated by the Holy Spirit.

### **Key Lessons Summary:**

1. **Reliance on God:** Recognize and accept that our sufficiency comes from God alone.
2. **Embrace the New Covenant:** Understand the superiority and permanence of the new covenant in Christ, which brings life and righteousness.
3. **Boldness in Faith:** Approach ministry and life with boldness, knowing the glory of the new covenant.
4. **Spiritual Freedom:** Appreciate and live in the freedom provided by the Spirit, free from the constraints of the old covenant.
5. **Continual Transformation:** Allow the Holy Spirit to continually transform you into the image of Christ, reflecting His glory more and more.

These lessons encourage believers to live a life reliant on God's sufficiency, to value the new covenant, to embrace the freedom and transformation offered by the Holy Spirit, and to minister with boldness and confidence.