



A Church Where Freedom Reigns

SERIES: *Understanding the Church*

In the magazine, *Rolling Stone*, Chris Heath discussed religion with megamovie star Brad Pitt. Heath reported that this was a subject Pitt returned to time and time again. Religion, says Pitt, is the same thing as oppression, "because it stifles any kind of personal individual freedom." He adds, "I dealt with a lot of that, and my family would diametrically disagree with me on all of that." In the article, Pitt even argued that the parable of the Prodigal Son "is an authoritarian tale told to keep people in line." He explains: "This is a story which says if you go out and try to find your own voice and find what works for you and makes sense for you, then you are going to be destroyed and you will be humbled and you will not be alive again until you come home to the father's ways."

There are many people in our society today who would agree with Brad Pitt that religion, or even the Christian faith, is about oppression. That it's the opposite of freedom, because true freedom is all about throwing off all constraints and doing what you want to do. But the Word of God says something quite different. In 2 Cor. 3:17, the Apostle Paul writes, "**Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.**" This morning, I want us to look at this statement and the surrounding verses and ask, "What does that really mean? How can I really live in the reality of that as a follower of Christ? What does that really look like for me as an individual and for us as a church?"

This statement takes place in the context of a discussion Paul is having over what he calls the new covenant, which is far more glorious than the old covenant. Under the old covenant there is bondage, but under the new covenant there is freedom. The old covenant was that arrangement made between God and the Israelites. God gave them his law engraved on stone tablets and commanded them to keep that law in order to have life. The old covenant leaves everything up to us; God gives us the rules and it's up to us to keep them.

In contrast to that, Paul describes life under the new covenant in vv. 12-13.

"Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech, and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away."

I. MOSES' VEIL 3:12-13

Paul begins by contrasting his ministry under the new covenant with that of Moses under the old. Paul says "**Having therefore such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech, and we are not like Moses...**" The word "boldness" really means "openness." It was used in the Greek world to describe the freedom of open speech given to Greek citizens. To be open, especially in certain contexts, requires a certain amount of courage and confidence. This is where the idea of boldness comes in. It's not easy at times to be open. All too often, our fears and insecurities get in the way.

So the freedom to be open and bold is a characteristic of those who live under the new covenant. And it comes from hope. That's why he says, "**Having therefore such a hope...**" So often we try to muster it up from within ourselves. As long as the basis for our freedom is in ourselves or in our own abilities, we'll always end up short-handed. Even though we may act bold and open deep down we'll be operating out of fear. But when our hope is in God, who through the promise of the new covenant works in us and through us, we're free to be open.

In order to help visualize this, Paul gives us a negative illustration from the life of Moses. Moses is a contrast to the kind of freedom Paul claimed for himself. The incident in Moses' life can be found in Exodus 34. It says that when Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the stone tablets, his face shone with the glory of the Lord. As a result the people of Israel were afraid to look at him. And so, after speaking to them, look what Moses did according to v. 33, "**When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.**" Now from what we can tell, this was entirely appropriate. It seems that Moses put a veil over his face to alleviate the fears of his people from seeing the reflection of God's glory.

But Paul tells us here in 2 Corinthians that there was more to it than that. He says Moses had an ulterior motive - he wanted to hide the fact that the shine on his face was fading away. He didn't want them to stare at it to the end - right down to the last glimmer and see him when it was gone. Up in vv. 7-11 Paul says the fading glory was a symbol of the fact that the old covenant was fading away; it was not permanent, it was a "passing fancy" we might say. From the beginning, the old covenant was never meant to be a permanent

arrangement; it was designed by God to show us our own sin and inability to be righteous on our own. It was designed to prepare us for Christ. It seems Moses sensed this, but he didn't want to let on to the people. And so, he covered up.

So, under the new covenant, Paul was open and confident and bold, while under the old covenant Moses was fearful and closed and veiled. And when we live under the old covenant today we're forced to play the same game that Moses did. 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 made of the right stuff to keep it. But instead of acknowledging that, we cover our inadequacy up. We try to pretend that all is well. We try harder to be what deep down we know we can never be - like the proverbial aging movie star who tries to cover up her age with make-up or face-lifts or tummy-tucks. You see, when we look to ourselves as the source of our confidence and adequacy, we will always live in fear of being found out; we'll never be free; we'll always be trying to prove that we're something we know deep down we can never be by ourselves.

Most of you know the popular TV talk show host David Letterman. Letterman says that this about his work:

"Every night you're trying to prove your self worth. It's like meeting your girlfriend's family for the first time. You want to be the absolute best, wittiest, smartest, most charming, best-smelling version of yourself. If I can make people enjoy the experience and have a higher regard for me when I'm finished, it makes me feel like an entire person. If I've come up short of that, I'm not happy. How things go for me every night is how I feel about myself for the next 24 hours. Because I'm not playing a character - I'm trying to give you the best version of myself."

I appreciate his honesty, but what a great example of the absolute tyranny of living apart from the freedom that God gives. You see, under the new covenant we're free to be open and honest about who and what we are. And sometimes, let's face it, that's not a very pretty picture. But under the new covenant, we know we're accepted.

The sad thing is that many Christians who ought to be living under the freedom of the new covenant, live as if they were under the old. We who've 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 standards. Christians wear veils too;

we're experts at wearing veils. It usually starts out with a proper 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 - do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not get drunk with wine, etc. Sometimes we go even further and add others of our own just to be safe - no movies, no dancing, no drinking, read your Bible every day, the list goes on. Now sometimes these guidelines are very helpful, but somewhere along the line a subtle shift takes place in our thinking. The focus of our Christian life becomes keeping the list rather receiving the grace of God.

That usually results in one of two things. If our list is demanding and unrealistic, we end up living in a perpetual state of guilt and fear before God. There are a lot of Christians out there who have the look of defeat of their faces because 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 pretty good about yourself. You can become proud. Of course, you're always careful to give all the glory to God. You don't brag about your spirituality, you know better than that, but there is a subtle pride that develops in your spirit which sooner or later will reveal itself outwardly. It usually comes out in a judgmental, critical spirit towards others who don't live up to your list. We become intolerant of other Christians who can't seem to get their act together. 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?

Years ago, a poem was published by an anonymous author in a Young Life magazine which reveals the tendency we all have to hide behind a mask:

*Don't be fooled by me.
Don't be fooled by the face I wear
For I wear a mask,
I wear a thousand masks,
Masks I'm afraid to take off.
And none of them are me.*

*Pretending is an art that's second nature to me,
But don't be fooled,
For God's sake don't be fooled.*

*I give you the impression that I'm secure,
That all is sunny and unruffled with me,
Within as well as without;
That confidence is my name and coolness my game,
That the water's calm and I'm in command,
And that I need no one.
But don't believe me, please.*

What a sad commentary on what in many churches is the normal state of affairs. You would think we would see through it all. As a matter of fact, you would have thought

that the Israelites would have seen through it in Moses.

II. THE ISRAELITE VEIL 3:14-15

But Paul says the ancient Israelites had minds that were hardened.

“But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ.

But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart;”

They were unable to see that the law was only temporary; a fading glory. It wasn't all Moses' fault; they themselves had become blind and dulled to the reality that the law couldn't save them.

And Paul says the same veil lies over the reading of the old covenant to this day; not a physical veil but a metaphorical one. It was customary for the old covenant, the law of Moses, to be read in the synagogues of Paul's day. And when that law is read the veil remains, the veil that covers up the reality that it can't give us the life it promises and that it was never meant to be the end all of God's work in our lives. And the Jewish nation continues to live under the misconception that the law is God's way to salvation. There is a veil over their own hearts which keeps them from seeing the truth.

Yet Paul always held out hope for individual Jews like himself. It's possible for all of us to have the veil removed. In the next few verses he shows us how. Look at vv. 16-17.

“but whenever a person 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 liberty.”

III. THE REMOVAL OF THE VEIL 3:16-18

Once again in the back of Paul's mind is Exodus 34. Whenever Moses went into the Tent of Meeting to be in the Lord's presence he took the veil off, and then when he came back out he put it back on. Paul is using Moses as an example. He says in the same way today when someone "turns" to the Lord the veil is removed. For Paul, turning to the Lord means to trust the Lord for salvation. It's a turning away from trying to save ourselves by being good and a turning towards Christ as our sin-bearer and savior. That's how the veil's removed, by turning to the Lord.

In v. 17 Paul tells us the Holy Spirit's role in all of this, **"Now the Lord is the Spirit..."** He's referring to the same Lord he just mentioned in v. 16 - the One we turn to. He's saying that when we turn to the Lord we *experience* His Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit coming into our lives is one of the blessings of the new covenant. Up in v. 8 Paul

even called the new covenant "the ministry of the Spirit."

And what does that Spirit do in our lives? Look what Paul says, *"where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."* Because God has accepted us in Christ; because we no longer are in bondage to a law system which keeps us condemned, we're free to be ourselves before both God and man. We don't have to wear the veil! We can come into the presence of God, confessing our sin, trusting that through Christ we're fully acceptable. We can stand before others, without any false fronts, acknowledging our own inadequacies.

Look what happens when the veil is removed according to v.18.

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

This is the climax of Paul's argument. When the veil is removed we're free to be transformed. That's what freedom is. True freedom is not about doing whatever you want to do, rather it's about becoming the person you were designed to be. And that freedom is found only in turning to the Lord and yielding your life to Christ. The word "transformed" which he uses here is one from which we get our word "metamorphosis." It means to be changed into another form. The new covenant is not about us trying to change ourselves, but it's not about us just staying the same either. Freedom means the freedom to become what we long to become. Who wants to stay the same? As believers we want to be more holy, more loving. Have you ever wondered how that happens in the Christian life? Well, the word of God gives us here one of the clearest statements on this in all of Scripture.

Notice who it is that changes. Paul says, *"We all, with unveiled face..."* He's not just talking about Moses. 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 qualify.

Notice also he tells us what we're being transformed into. We're being transformed into *"the same image from glory to glory."* What image is he talking about? He's talking about the image of God. We're changed into an image of His glory. God's ultimate purpose for us is to morally transform us into His image.

Notice also when this takes place. He says, *"...we are being transformed..."* In other words, this is an ongoing process. It doesn't happen overnight. It doesn't

happen the minute we come to Christ. It happens gradually. Like getting older, which happens little by little, without us being aware of it.

And notice also who does the changing. We're not changing ourselves; we are "being transformed" by someone else. At the end of the verse he tells us who: "...**just as from the Lord, the Spirit.**" The Spirit of God changes us.

Finally, notice how it is this change takes place. It takes place as we "**behold as in a mirror the glory of the Lord.**" If you have the NIV it says we "reflect" the glory of the Lord, but "to behold" captures the idea better. The word means "to look in a mirror," which the Corinthians knew all about because their city was famous for its bronze mirrors. Moses beheld the Lord and his face was changed; we behold the Lord and our lives are changed. The difference is that while Moses got to see the Lord face to face we just get to look at him in a mirror.

We change by beholding the glory of the Lord as in a mirror. What a contrast to how we normally think about change. Some of us believe that the key to change is knowledge. We live in the information age, and so often we think that change will take place if we can only access and master more information. If I just read the right books on how to be a better parent. Some of us believe the key is therapeutic. If I can just learn more about my own 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. But 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, "**beholding the glory of the Lord**" is simply the same thing as turning to and trusting Christ. As we trust Christ 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.

Like Peter. Remember how Peter saw Jesus walking on the water and he wanted to try it too? And so Jesus said, "Come on, Peter!" And Peter got out of the boat and started walking on the water. But then he started looking around at the wind and the waves and as soon as he did he started 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 will be changed.

David Brainard was a missionary to the Indians in the early part of our nation's history. He once wrote this in his journal: "*I never got away from Jesus and him crucified. When my people were gripped by the great evangelical doctrine of Christ and him crucified, I had no need to give them instructions about morality. I found that one followed as the sure and inevitable fruit of the other.*" In other words, when Christ is the center of our attention, transformation automatically happens. When the veil is removed and we see who Jesus Christ is and we keep our eyes on what he has done for us, it changes us.

CONCLUSION

I'm sure many of you have seen *The Phantom of the Opera*. It's about a man who lives in shame and darkness and isolation and wears a mask because of a facial disfigurement. But in the course of the story, he falls in love, and slowly the power of love begins to free him from his shame. At one point the mask even comes off, but when the woman he loves is repelled it drives him even deeper into himself; again, hiding behind his mask. That's what we're like without Christ, living under the bondage of the old covenant - afraid, ashamed and isolated.

But when we meet up with Jesus Christ, we meet up with 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 Gospel. That's freedom. Not the freedom to do whatever we want, but the freedom to become what we've always wanted to be.

And that freedom needs to permeate our life together. This past week I had a phone call from a guy who was in my youth group 20 years ago. He's married now and has four boys. I haven't spoken with him in about 10 years, so I was surprised and delighted to hear his voice. About half way through our conversation he said, "I have something I need to tell you."

I said, "What's that?"

He said, "When I was in high school you asked me a question about something I was ashamed of, and I lied to you. I've felt bad about that all these years, and I just wanted to come clean."

If I could of hugged him I would have. He took his mask off and he let me see the real man. What I saw was the face of a man becoming more like Christ. I call that freedom; that's the face of freedom.

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