



I'm sure most of you are familiar with the story, The Phantom of the Opera. 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 a facial disfigurement. But in the course of the story, 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 Christine can see his disfigured face, but unfortunately she's repelled and that drives him deeper into hiding.

What's funny is there's a story very much like this in the Bible. I was reminded of it as I was reading a little over a week ago in Exodus 34. It'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 he received the Ten Commandments. It was up there he pleaded with God not to destroy the Israelites after they made the golden calf. It was up there Moses was able to catch a glimpse of God's glory. The writer even says that Moses spoke with God "face to face." And it was because of that Moses was forced to wear a mask or a veil of his own. Look at Exodus 34:29–35.

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.

Moses had this glory or glow on his face from being in the presence of God on the mountain, and later at the tent of meeting. And that caused a good deal of fear among the people. God's glory isn't something you just deal with casually; they were afraid. But Moses wants to speak to them. He wants to pass on the commands of the Lord. Then we read about this veil he wore.

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 remains 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.

The question is, 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 the Apostle Paul has been talking about the Old Covenant vs. the New Covenant. The Old Covenant was the arrangement made between God and the Israelites. God gave them his law on stone tablets and commanded them to keep it in order 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. 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. In the New Covenant everything comes from God and nothing comes from us.

The New Covenant has a Greater Glory than the Old Covenant

And, as we'll see, this helps explain what was going on with Moses and the veil. 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!

The key word in this section is *glory*. It's repeated ten times. The glory and splendor 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.

There's a certain attractiveness to the Old Covenant. The law itself is attractive and so is the challenge of trying to keep it. There's something in each one of us that thinks we can do it and glories in trying. By the way, that's why so many cults emphasize living a moral life and that holds a certain attraction. That's the glory of the Old Covenant.

But Paul says if the Old Covenant had some glory, the New Covenant has so much more. In fact, the glory of the New Covenant is so much greater than the old that the glory of the old has become 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. 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 none of us 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. We're accepted by him 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. Up 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?

Moses Wore a Veil to Hide the Fading Glory of the Old Covenant

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 (verses 12–13).

The word "bold" really means "open." It was to describe someone whose words and actions were open for all to see. 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. This confidence isn't in our own abilities. As long as the basis for our confidence

is in our own abilities, we'll always come up short. Even though we may act bold and open, deep down we'll be operating out of fear. But when our hope is in God, not in ourselves, we can be supremely confident and open.

Paul then uses Moses as a negative illustration. Moses wasn't bold; he wasn't open. Moses had an ulterior motive in wearing that veil—he wanted to hide the fact that the shine on his face was fading away. That fading glory symbolized 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 own depravity 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. Perhaps he was afraid things would get out of hand. Perhaps they'd doubt his leadership. And so, he covered up.

Under the New Covenant Paul was open, confident and bold, while under the Old Covenant Moses was fearful, 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 our inadequacy up. 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 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'll always be trying to prove to ourselves and to others and maybe even to God we're something we know deep down we can never be by ourselves.

David Letterman understands this. He once said of being a talk show host, "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." What a great example of the tyranny of living apart from the freedom and confidence God gives. Under the New Covenant we're free to be open and honest 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 is 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'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 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; 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's 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 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?

Years ago during the Jesus Movement a songwriter named John Fischer wrote a song that's a humorous take-off on the veils evangelical Christians often wear to cover up our inadequacy to keep the Law. It goes like this:

Evangelical veil productions! Pick one up at quite a reduction;
Got all kinds of shapes and sizes; introductory bonus prizes!
Special quality, one way see through; you can see them but they
can't see you.
Never have to show yourself again.
Just released, a Moses model; comes with shine in a plastic
bottle,
It makes you look like you've just seen the Lord!
Just one daily application and you'll fool the congregation,
Guaranteed to last the whole week through.
Got a back-from-the-summer-camp veil, with a mountain-top
look that'll never fail,
As long as you renew it every year.
Lots of special Jesus freak smiles, everyone comes with a
permanent smile,
One way button and a sticker for your car.
You're protected!

The Veil is Taken Away as We Turn to Christ

That's a funny song, but what a sad commentary on what in many churches is the normal state of affairs. You'd think we'd see through it all. As a matter of fact, you'd think the Israelites

would see through it in Moses. But Paul says they had minds hardened and a veil of their own. Look at verses 14–16.

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.

They were unable 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 Jews 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. 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 Christ 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 is removed, by turning to the Lord.

When the Veil is Removed and We're Free to be Transformed

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 Holy Spirit coming into our lives 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 man. 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 own inadequacies, trusting that the Spirit of God is doing his work of changing us from the inside out. At our Men's Retreat this morning our men are having a time of open sharing where a lot of guys will be taking their veils off for the first time. Pray for them; that's a powerful experience.

Look what happens when the veil is removed:

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 (v. 18).

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 the freedom to become what we long for. Who wants to stay the same? As believers we want to be more holy, more loving, 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. 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 changed. 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. This is 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 tells 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 into a mirror." Moses beheld the Lord and his face was changed; we behold the Lord and we're transformed. The difference is while Moses saw the Lord face to face we just see 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 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 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.

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 in Jesus and keeping our hearts and minds focused on him. It's as we look to 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. Remember how Peter saw Jesus walking on the water and he wanted to try it too? 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'll be changed forever.

Mike Yaconelli writes, "Spirituality is not 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 is present in the tangledness of our lives. Spirituality isn't about being fixed; it's about God's being present in the mess of our unfixedness."

There's a powerful scene towards the end of the *The Phantom of the Opera*. Erik kidnaps Christine and tries to force her to marry him. He says if she refuses, he'll use explosives to destroy 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 loved. So Christine 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 own mother) or has been allowed to give one and is overcome with emotion. He lets Christine go and tells her, "Go and marry the boy whenever you wish. I know you love him." She leaves on the condition that when he dies she'll come back and bury him.

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 and 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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