Beholding and Becoming
2 Cor 3:7-18 (Exodus 35:29-35)

We're looking at Paul's second - though more properly his third - letter to the church in Corinth. And we're in a part of the letter where Paul is addressing what authentic Christian leadership looks like. And that's because new leaders have arrived in Corinth saying Paul's *not* the real deal.

But how should these Corinthian Christians, or you and I, decide whether that's true or not? How can you sort genuine Christian ministry or leadership from the fake?

Well, think about one aspect of leadership: change. And how change happens. And think about that in terms of people's personal lives. How does personal, life change happen?

Think about it for yourself. I mean, do you have a vision for the kind of person you want to become? Maybe you think of that in terms of your career - you have some kind of plan of where you want to go in life. Or maybe your body: you have this image of what you want to look like and you're working out to try and get there. Or maybe in terms of relationships - you're single, and you don't want to be - your goal is to find a partner.

The problem is that if you want something too much in any of those areas - career or body or relationships, it begins to show cracks in your character, doesn't it? Over-desire some career goal and you'll walk over others to get there, or hate yourself if you don't get there. Over-desire in the area of your physical appearance, and you'll become obsessive, or vain, or spend just a bit too long in front of the mirror. Over-desire a significant relationship and you'll make poor choices and miss red flags.

And so when it comes to the person you want to become, character inevitably trumps them all. But, do you have a sense of the kind of character, the kind of person, you want to become? Maybe that's no more developed than you see someone else's joy, or courage or patience - and you think, I want to be more like them. Or maybe it's very conscious and you recognise certain things about your character and you want to change them.

But how do you get there? Well, that's what Paul deals with here. Because as he tackles what authentic Christian ministry looks like, he tackles exactly this: how does authentic life change happen?

The Death of Moralism
Look at v7-8, 'Now if *the ministry of death*, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not *the ministry of the Spirit* have even more glory?' And Paul's contrasting two very different types of ministry, two very different approaches to how you can relate to God and how change can happen in your life.

And the first is the way these new leaders were saying you should do life: that you can become a better you by your own effort, by working on yourself, by having more faith, or drawing on your own inner resources. And Paul is saying, that's the way of the Law. And Moses went up Mount Sinai and came down with the commandments of God carved on stone tablets. And Paul calls that, 'the ministry of death'.

Now, why could God telling the people of Israel how to live, and what God requires of them, and them - or you and me - trying to obey that, be called 'death'?

Because the giving of the Law was surrounded by death. Moses climbed the mountain, but if anyone else tried to approach it, they'd die. And the Law contained commandments that if you broke them, the sentence was death. And there were other commandments which, if you broke them, you didn't die, but only because you could offer an animal sacrifice in your place. But what happened to the animal? It died.

But Paul's taking about something else as well. And that's that the Law brings about an inner death. Because it tells you, this is wrong so don't do it, and this is right so do it. But you can read God's law and and think, yes, but I want to do what I want to do - and that makes you a rebel against God. Or, you might read God's law and try and obey it, try and be that better you. But if you fail you fall into despair, and if you succeed you fall into pride. And both self-hatred and self-pride are a kind of death. A death of good character.

But the law also brings death by provoking you. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 7:9, 'I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.' When I was an undergraduate, I heard John Chapman, an Australian evangelist, speak at a missions week. And he told a story about getting on a train and seeing a sign that said, 'do not spit in this train'. And Chapman said, it had never occurred to him to spit in the train, until he read that sign, but having read it he could just feel the spit building up until he could resist no longer!

It's why Paul calls the Law, v9, 'the ministry of condemnation.' It tells you you're guilty but gives you no power to do anything about it. It tells you, 'this is what your character should be like', but it doesn't help you get there. It just tells you how far short you fall. And worse still, all your efforts to change either end in failure or pride, or even more sin. All of which is death.

Now, you might think 'yeh, but when I think about being a better person, I'm not thinking about the Old Testament law, I'm just thinking in terms of being kinder, or more loving, or less angry.' Sure, but the moment you start talking about better, or more, you're effectively just establishing a new law with standards to meet. And so whether it's your own personal targets, or the guidelines and steps of some self-help guru, you're still going to face the same problems of your inability to keep it, or your pride if you do. So whether it's God's law, or anyone else's, moralism - you trying to improve yourself, and be a better you, or better than others - always ends in death.

But then Paul takes another angle: the glory shining on Moses' face. Because Moses comes down the mountain and his face is alight with God's reflected glory. But the people see it, and how do they respond? With fear. They realise this is a sign that Moses has been with God and they pull back. So, every time Moses came out having met with God in the Tent of Meeting, he'd veil his face, and when he went back in, he'd take it off. And in between the glow would slowly fade.

And from that Paul makes two points. Firstly, the fact that the glory faded should tell you, the Old Testament law wasn't the deal to end all deals. Telling people, 'this is the kind of person you must be, the kind of life you must live, this is the standard', was not the last thing God had to say on the subject. In fact, three times, in v7, 11 and 13, Paul says the glory of the Old Covenant was 'being brought to an end.' So whether it's some new leader in Corinth, or an internet pastor you listen to, or

a self-help guru whose books you read, saying you've just got to believe in yourself, or have more faith, or follow these 7 steps, it's a form of law keeping, it brings an inner death *and* it's glory soon fades.

But secondly, Paul says it's an illustration of people's separation from God. You see, Moses experienced the glory of God, but who else did? No one. Everyone else just pulled back scared. As Paul says in v14, 'their minds were hardened.' They'd been rescued from slavery to be the people who displayed his glory to the world. But instead, they refused to embrace that relationship with God, leaving Moses as the only one reflecting God's glory and the veil over his face a picture of the separation between them and God. He'd get face to face with God and come out glowing, but then have to wear a veil as a walking parable of a people refused access to the presence of God because of the state of their hearts.

And yet, Paul's point is that that wasn't only a problem back then. Verse 15, 'Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts.' Because when you think your standing before God depends on your moral conduct, and you making the standard, you improving yourself, you're going to be as wary and fearful of God as they were.

I mean, imagine a young couple who are dating, but she knows she has to meet his standards in some area or face his displeasure. How's she going to feel? She's always going be anxious, isn't she? Always on her guard. Am I good enough? And if that's the basis of your relationship with God like her you'll be emotionally guarded, you'll pull back. You'll see God's perfections, his standards, but miss his love; you'll see the glory but you won't see the grace. You'll see his justice but miss his mercy. Because you won't see that all along the law was pointing you to something even more glorious.

The Life of the Spirit
Look at v8-9, 'Will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.'

So if the Old Testament Law, or the kind of 'pull yourself up by the boot strings' moralism advocated by these leaders in Corinth, resulted in condemnation, the New Covenant, the new thing God is doing, the ministry of the Spirit that Paul's preaching, results in righteousness. One says, 'this is how you must live', but you don't and you can't, so you're guilty. But the other says, 'no, you're not guilty. You're righteous. God sees you and says, 'you don't need to polish yourself up for me to accept you. I already approve of you.' Which is why Paul says in v6 that 'the Spirit *gives life*.' Life instead of death, righteousness instead of condemnation.

But how does that work?! I mean, 'God sees me and says I'm ok', that goes against everything every other religion says, because everyone else is saying, you've got to do this and this to get to heaven, or achieve Nirvana. And Paul's saying, 'no, in the ministry of the Spirit God sees you and says 'you're righteous in my sight.' But how does that work?! Well, before he tells us, Paul goes back to this idea of glory.

Because the glory of the Old, of the Law, is nothing in comparison to the glory of the new: v10, 'What once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.'

Do you remember the old dial up phones, where you'd stick your finger in the hole and turn the disc? But now, at a fraction of the size, you've got this video phone in your pocket. Or remember the days when to listen to music you put a vinyl record on a turntable and put down a needle and listen to it scratching away? But now you've got this little plastic blob in the corner of your room that you can yell at 'Alexa, Alexa wake up'. It's so much more relaxing. Or imagine you're a pretty good tennis player, and you win all the club competitions. But then a new player joins the club and he or she wipes the floor with you. Does it mean you, or dial up phones, or record players weren't good back in the day? No. It just means something better has come along and in comparison…. There's no comparison.

And Paul's saying, was the glory on Moses' face real glory? Yes! But that glory was nothing in comparison to what the ministry of the Spirit, through the gospel, has to offer you. Because in place of death it brings life; in place of condemnation it gives you righteousness. And more even than that, it has the power to do what Old Testament Law or modern moralism can never do. It has the power to change you.

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Look at v14 again, 'Their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away'. Now, none of us are going to be sad to see the back of face masks, are we? Because they just make communicating and getting to know people way harder. But what if that's what it's like relating to God? What if there's always something between you. Not over your face, but over your heart. And it creates distance. But that's exactly what it is like when your standing before God depends on you and your performance and you making the grade. There'll always be distance, because there'll always be this background fear, because you know you can never be really good enough to approach him with confidence.

But Paul says, yes, but that veil, that division, that distance is removed in Christ, because it's in Christ that you're declared not guilty. Because at the cross, he was declared guilty for you, because at the cross he took all your failure to be good enough upon himself. And as you put your faith in him, and turn to him, he takes your guilt and you take his righteousness. Verse16, 'when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.' Because in Christ, there is no barrier between you and God. And so, there's no reason to drawback in fear, or hide your face in shame. Jesus has made you righteous.

But moralism, trying to make the grade and be good enough, or spiritual enough, or full of faith enough, can never do that for you. Only Christ can. Because the ministry of the Spirit, the proclamation of the gospel, is not about what you've done or have to do, it's what Jesus has done for you. Verse 17, 'Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.' Freedom from death. Freedom from condemnation. Freedom from fear. Freedom to approach God with confidence.

And as you do, that's when your life really begins to change. Verse 18, 'And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.'

You see, the ministry of the Spirit, the good news of what Jesus has done, doesn't out-glory the ministry of the law just because it's new, but because of its scale. You see, in the Old Covenant, who entered God's presence, beheld his glory, and came out shining? Moses. One man. But now, in Christ, who gets to behold God's glory and reflect it to the world? All of us. So Paul is saying that

the Law was like a single candle flickering on a football pitch in the black of night. Is that candle burning and providing light? Absolutely. And did Moses reflect God's glory? Absolutely. But turn on the floodlights with their multitude of bulbs and that candle is overwhelmed with light. And in the gospel, the floodlights go on, because a multitude of thousands upon thousands, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, including you and me, get to behold and reflect God's glory.

And it's as you behold his glory that you change. You see, you always become what you behold don't you? You inevitably become more like what you spend your time looking at, or watching on line, or reading - it just shapes and forms you. Watch porn and it's going to effect the way you see and treat women. Read angry blog articles and you're going to find yourself becoming more angry. But, Paul says, behold Christ's glory and you are going to be steadily transformed into his image, 'from one degree of glory to another.' You're going to become increasingly the person you were always meant to be: an image bearer, one who reflects the glory of God. And that doesn't mean you're going to physically glow like Moses, like you've eaten radioactive soup. It means the transformation of your character.

But if to change you've got to behold Christ's glory, what's *glory*? Well, in the Old Testament, glory carried this sense of weight, of heaviness. And God's glory was the reverence-inducing display of who he is. But where do you get to see who Christ is and see his character in all its weight?

Well, John said of the incarnation, 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory' (John 1:14). And when you behold the eternal Son of God giving up his glory, and humbling himself as a man, to rescue us, you behold his glory. Then, at the wedding at Cana, as Jesus turned the water into wine, John said Jesus 'manifested his glory' (John 2:11). And as you see Jesus rescuing that newly married couple from public shame and declaring himself to be the ultimate Master of the Feast, you behold his glory. And at his transfiguration, as Moses - representing the law, and Elijah - representing the prophets, are eclipsed by Jesus, Luke says the disciples, 'saw his glory' (Luke 9:32). So when you see Jesus as the fulfilment of every prophet, priest and king, you behold his glory. And Jesus said that the day will come when we will see the Son of Man coming in glory to repay each one for what they have done. And when you see and know Christ is the ultimate righteous judge, you behold his glory. As the writer to the Hebrews says, 'We see him… Jesus, crowned with glory' (Heb 2:9).

And yet, it's in the garden, on the night he was betrayed that Jesus prayed, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you." (John 17:1) And it's at the cross, as Jesus gives himself for rebels like us, as he is condemned that we might go free, that we behold his glory.

So where do you behold his glory? In his incarnation, and transfiguration, in his living and dying and rising and ascending and reigning. And it's as we behold his glory, and think deeply about all that he is, and all that he has done and will do for us, that we grow in his likeness. Because you see his humility and it humbles you; you see his grace and you become more gracious; you see his courage and you become more courageous.

Look at your own character and see its faults, and you want to be more kind, and more patient, and more pure, and more generous, and more loving. But what we're really saying is, I want to be more like Christ. And only the gospel has the power to do that, as it transforms us from one degree of glory to another. You behold and you become.