

2 Corinthians 3 (18) – Sanctification 101

In 2 Corinthians 3, the Apostle Paul is contrasting the Old and New Covenants. The Old Covenant was made by God with Israel under Moses. It included the Ten Commandments, but also 613 other laws that guided all of the life of the people. And it was surrounded by a lot of ritual ceremonies and sacrifices. And it was so glorious that you could see the reflected glory of God himself shining in the face of Moses. As vs.7 says, *it came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory*. As vs.13 says, *Moses had to put a veil over his face*.

But Paul calls it *the ministry of death*. Why? Because the Old Testament law had no power to sanctify you. It was given to expose your helplessness to live up to the standards of God. Now the law is glorious in that it reveals God's righteousness. Paul isn't saying the law is bad. He is saying we are bad, and that the law in itself can't impart the spiritual life you need to be made right with God. And so, you can't become holy by keeping the law, because you can't keep it perfectly. James 2:10 says...*whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it*.

So, the law can't make you holy. And what's more, the law actually provokes the rebellion that's in you. In Romans 7, Paul said that knowing the command, "*You shall not covet*", caused him to covet even more. The law is your judge, and weighed against it, you're a sinner who falls short of the glory of God. But that's what makes Jesus so important. He fulfilled the law for you, and God credits the righteousness of Jesus to you as a free gift of grace, which you receive by faith. As Romans 8:1-2 says *there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death*. And Romans 10:4 says *for Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes*.

The Old Covenant law brought people face to face with their sin and kept a veil between them and the glory of God. In the New Covenant, the veil is removed. The truth of the New Covenant isn't full of types, symbols, and shadows, and it isn't like some mystery to be interpreted. The glory of the New Covenant is on full display in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The way of salvation absolutely clear. And so is the way of sanctification, or growing to be more like Jesus.

Paul says the New Covenant is the ministry of the Spirit, and it has even more glory than the Old Covenant. This isn't the only place in the New Testament that says this. The book of Hebrews is all about how Christ and the New Covenant is superior to the Old Covenant. The New Covenant is the promise of freedom from the condemnation of the law. Redemption is applied to you through the regeneration and indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and your sins are forgiven, you're enabled to repent and trust in Jesus, and you're given a new heart that delights in God's commands. And as you continue to turn to Jesus, these realities become more real in your daily experience.

Which brings us to vs.18. Vs.18 is saying that you get to look at the glory of God in the person of Christ face to face and with a completely unveiled face. And as you do that, you become more and more like Jesus. It's not like Moses who just got a brief glimpse of God's glory. You get to stare, again and again, and that glory gradually transforms you. That's how sanctification works.

This text is descriptive of those who are in the New Covenant. And Paul says that every Christian is currently in the process of transformation, of sanctification, of becoming more like Jesus in your

practice. But this text isn't just descriptive, presenting you with a reality. It is also prescriptive, presenting you with a possibility. In this verse you have a promise, but you also have a responsibility. And the truths of this text are foundational to any pursuit of holiness in your life. Here you see a framework of God's plan for your growth. Looking at this text you see the reality, the possibility, the means, the nature, the purpose, the process, and the agent of sanctification.

First, then, is **the reality of sanctification**. The text says *and we all...are being transformed*. There are two facets to this. Sanctification is both positional and practical. Positional sanctification is where God sets you apart for himself and regards you as holy because of your union with Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:30 says *you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption*. That's why Paul refers to believers as saints. The Bible doesn't call you a saint because you always act like one. The Bible calls you a saint because that is your legal position before God. If you're a Christian, you have already been sanctified. That's your position. You've been set apart for God. It has already happened.

But notice that this text says you *are being transformed*. This is something that is still happening. This is practical sanctification, where you are becoming conformed to the image of Christ. And it isn't some take it or leave it proposition. It is a promise, in that we are all being transformed. But is also a responsibility, to keep looking at Jesus. Those who aren't being transformed aren't who they think they are. You aren't in the New Covenant if you don't even care about holiness, because a saving faith leads to a living faith. And Hebrews 12:14 warns you to *strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord*. This isn't about perfection, it is about purpose. If your destination is heaven then your destiny is holiness.

This leads you to the next point, which is **the possibility of sanctification** (*with unveiled face...are being transformed*). All believers in Christ have an unveiled face. That means that the glory that you experience in Christ is not the fading glory of the Old Covenant where Moses' face had to be hidden by a veil. 2 Corinthians 4:3 says that the gospel is veiled to those who aren't saved. But 2 Corinthians 4:6 says through the gospel of Christ, you are given the spiritual ability to see *the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*. This isn't a physical radiance you see that makes your skin shine. This is the glory of the truth. Jesus is the truth (John 14:6), and in John 1:14 the Apostle says...*we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*.

Through the Incarnation, the glory of God was seen in the person of Jesus. Of course, you can't see him physically now. But Paul says that you can behold that same glory by seeing Jesus in the Scriptures, how it is like looking in a mirror, which is how most versions render this verse. In other words, when you're a Christian, there is no veil when the Scripture is read. Nothing is standing in your way of looking to Jesus and growing to be more like him. Notice it isn't a matter of intellect or education or financial position or social status or personal power. You can understand the Scriptures. Yes, you can be taught, and you will need to study, to contemplate, and to meditate on them. But you will see the glory of Jesus Christ in them. And as you do, you will grow. And the more you do, the more you grow. You can reflect the glory of Jesus. It is an endless possibility.

This points you to **the means of sanctification** (*beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed*). Growing as a Christian isn't about a formula, or through some strict adherence to legal standards of obedience. Practical sanctification isn't a matter of extreme effort, where you

just have to try harder to be good. Now you can go pretty far on willpower. But you can be doing good as far as an external measure and yet your heart's desires still not be changed. And you'll be miserable, and you'll fall back or just become a pharisee who nobody wants to be around. And it won't be because you're so holy. It will be because you're so hateful and hurtful.

No, that isn't the Bible way of sanctification. As you will see, the nature of sanctification is inside out, not outside in. What conforms you to the image of Christ is seeing him and receiving him as he is revealed to you in Scripture. It isn't will power, it is word power. Hebrews 12:1-2 says you can lay aside the weight of your sin and run the race with endurance by *looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter* of your faith. What you look at affects what you look like. To look like Jesus, you have to look at him. Then you can act like him from your heart.

The devil tries to get you to focus on your own struggle with sin rather than focusing on Christ, the one who has the power to deliver you. That way, when you feel successful in the battle, you develop pride. And when you don't do so well, you develop despair. Either way, the devil wins, and you lose. There is no victory in meditating on sin. There is great victory in meditating on Christ. Stop focusing on your failures, and focus on your faith, the object of your faith, not yourself, but your Savior. You've got to let Jesus be the hero of your story if you want a happy ending.

Why does one believer grow faster and deeper than another? Because of their focus on Jesus. This doesn't mean it is easy. The Christian life is not easy. It takes a lot of effort. But that effort is not simply about doing good deeds and outward conformity. It is about inner transformation. And that only happens as you look to Christ by faith, as revealed in the pages of Scripture. You read, study, and meditate on the Bible. You focus on applying the truth of the gospel to all of your life. You live by God's wisdom. You spend time with Christ, having fellowship with Christ. You diligently attend to the means of grace like prayer and the Lord's Supper. You go to church and hear the word preached, you worship and serve among God's people. This is how your heart will be changed to reflect his glory. Jesus changes your life from the inside out.

This is **the nature of sanctification** (*are being transformed*). Practical sanctification means you are changing. Christians must believe that people can change, because Jesus has changed them, and is changing them. But this change isn't just cleaning up your outside. The Greek word for transformed is where we get our English word "metamorphosis." But the Greek word describes more than an outward transformation. It is talking about the inner transformation, an inward change in your character. The nature of sanctification is inside out, not outside in. This inner change is what makes the outside truly conform to Christ as an act of worship. Romans 12:2 describes this when it says that instead of being conformed to the pattern of this world, you are *transformed by the renewal of your mind*. Into the character of Christ.

And that is **the purpose of sanctification**. You are transformed *into the same image* as the Lord. God wants to make you like Jesus. That's his purpose. Romans 8:29 says God predestined Christians *to be conformed to the image of his Son*. And it will happen. Philippians 1:6 says...*I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*. The total transformation will happen when you finally see Jesus in the flesh when he returns. 1 John 3:2 says...*we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is*. Your character is going to be just like Jesus one day.

But until that day, your transformation isn't some onetime experience, it is an ongoing experience. The **process of sanctification** is that you are transformed *from one degree of glory to another*. Your growth in grace is progressive. It starts when you are first converted, and it continues for the rest of your life. And here is the truth about your present level of sanctification: You reflect what you reflect upon. If you keep playing sad songs you'll be sad. And the more you focus on Jesus the more you'll be more like him. Of course, the less you think about Jesus the less you'll be like him. You are in a lifelong process of change. God saved you to make you more like Jesus. God is the one who is doing the work. But you are responsible for keeping your eyes on Jesus. Philippians 2:12-13 illustrates this dual dynamic when it says...*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*.

Yes, it is God the Holy Spirit who is **the agent of sanctification**. You are not transforming yourself. It is the work of God in your soul. You will be fully transformed when Jesus returns. But until that time, while God is at work, you are responsible to work with him. Ephesians 4:30 says *...do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption*. If you are a Christian, you are the house of God. How good of a host are you? Is the Holy Spirit grieved to be there? Are you crowding him out? Or is he filling up the place?

You have the power to change a lot on the outside, and you can do some godly things. But you don't have the power to change your heart's desires and motives and affections so that you really want the things that God wants. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. There are a lot of professing Christians who look good on the outside, and may feel good on the inside. But deep down in their heart there is a lack of desire and ungodly affections and wrong motives because they don't really want what God wants. They don't behold the Lord. To behold the Lord is more than just reading about him in the Bible. What do I mean by that? Lots of people know lots of Bible but they don't actually see Jesus. Like the Jews who knew the OT but they didn't see how it pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. People can know a lot about Jesus and not know Jesus. To be sanctified in practice means that you want to see Jesus in such a way that he changes you to be more like him.

You have to see the glory of God. But when we speak of beholding the glory of the Lord, we aren't saying that the Holy Spirit gives you some mystical experience or ecstatic vision. No, what he does is to help you see the beauty and the perfection of Christ in the Bible, and it captures your heart's affections and changes your will so that you delight in doing God's will. Do you read the Bible with an eye to God, with a desire to see how holy and just and lovely and perfect and good he is? Do you meditate on the word of God as an act of worship? You see, sanctification problems are worship problems are misunderstanding God problems. The more you understand of God's intrinsic glory (the sum and substance of all his perfections) the more you will ascribe to him glory. A low view of God leads to low worship and low living. A high view of God leads to high worship and high and holy living. In other words, the deeper your understanding of God the deeper your worship will be and the holier your life will be.

You can't expect to work your way into heaven. Being a good person isn't enough. The only way to be declared righteous in God's eyes is to trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ. That's how you get saved, by God's grace. Galatians 2:21 – *I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose*. And the only way to grow in God's grace is to keep your eyes on Jesus. That's sanctification 101.

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The Possibility of Sanctification

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