

Sermon: Changed from glory to glory

2 Corinthians 3:4-18

Rev Dr Jos M Strengolt

As Christians we are all used to being criticized; it is normal because we are not perfect and deserve critique; and it is normal because others are not perfect and they think they must critique us, even when there is no reason for critique.

We are amazingly able to be harsh in our criticism of each other. Especially when others are not yet as perfect as we are.

Paul was under heavy fire by some leaders in the Corinthian church. He was deemed to be too weak, too much persecuted, and... he was criticized because of his message.

Old Covenant

One of the major points of criticism that many in the earliest church held against Paul, was that he did not take the laws of Israel serious enough. And are these not God's laws? And the national laws of Israel? How dare you even suggest we must not follow them!

Yes, Paul preached that for the sake of the unity of the church, Jewish followers of Jesus should not insist that gentile followers of Jesus should be circumcised.

And Paul taught that Jewish followers of Jesus should not stick too rigidly to their own biblical food-laws, because that would break the unity with the non-Jewish believers.

"Paul - you are not strict enough", that was the complaint.

So it was important for Paul to explain the difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. And new it really was - it brought some serious change.

In Greek there are two words for *new*. First, there is *neos* which means new in time and that alone. A baby is *neos* because she is a newcomer into the world.

Secondly, there is *kainos*, which means not only new in time, but also new in quality. If something is *kainos* it has brought a fresh element into the situation.

The New Covenant is not only *new* in regard to time; it is quite *different in kind* from the Old Covenant. There is a quality difference.

“We are”, Paul says, “ministers of the New Covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit.” And “the letter kills, the Spirit gives life.”

The law of Moses is the letter. Moses went up the mountain, and God gave the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets, and later also the whole law-book. This law was perfect, but it “killed”.

I think Paul is thinking mainly of the impact of the Jewish laws on those outside the people of Israel. For us, gentiles, the laws of Moses created a steep dividing wall between us and God and his people. So its impact on non-Jews was that it killed, it condemned.

It kept us far from God. We were dead for God. The laws did not help us, gentiles, to become part of the people of God - they were a high wall that kept us away, in darkness.

And elsewhere Paul says that even for the Jews, the laws that were good in themselves, mostly resulted in underlining their own shortcomings. Look at the law and you see yourself - standing condemned before God.

The laws did not help people to become better people than they were. It did not help them to become how God wants humans to be - as the perfectly sinless Adam in Paradise.

But the Gospel of the New Covenant is about Jesus Christ who came for all people, for Jews and gentiles, and who gave his Spirit to all his followers, irrespective of their background.

So we, from the US, Egypt, Zimbabwe, we are no longer far from God but through Jesus we have come close to the God of Israel who is also our God.

This is not the work of the law but the work of the Spirit. “The Spirit gives life” - these words echo the creation of Adam. God blew his Spirit in Adam to make him alive as the image of God.

And by the coming of Christ, the New Perfect Adam, you and I have been made into an image of God again. Humankind as God intended it, has been restored.

2 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom

So the New Covenant is much more glorious than the Old Covenant. The law could not restore the image of God in mankind, but Jesus did.

By the way, this word 'glorious' is theologically loaded with meaning; it does not just mean something great - it means the real presence of God. In Christ, God has given his glory back to humankind. That is something that law could never do.

This not a condemnation of the laws of the Bible. The laws are glorious too. That means, they are a reflection of God himself, the Glorious one.

Under the Old Covenant God had made great promises, promises of a New Covenant that would come and that would be characterized by

- the return of Gods Spirit and his Glory to the Temple,
- and the New Covenant would mean that the laws of God would be written on the hearts of the people.
- and the promise was that the gentiles, the nations, would come to God's Temple and that they would share in the Spirit and the service God.

All this happened on the Day of Pentecost - The Spirit returned to the Temple, the laws were written on the hearts of the believers, and for the world the way to God was opened.

Paul's logic is simple and effective; the glory of the Old Covenant was the law; the New Covenant is, however, marked by coming of the Spirit, who is the Lawgiver Himself. And the New Covenant is therefore much more glorious. Incomparably more glorious.

God does not want the laws that were rather cultural, national, temporal, to undermine the unity of his new temple, the church. And why should we allow that to happen? God himself is in his temple. We have the Lawgiver, not just his laws!

And this radical new orientation makes us bold, free, new people. Instead of focusing our eyes and our mind on the book with rules and regulations, we focus on the Holy Spirit, on Jesus Christ - on God himself.

Israel thought that it needed to look at the Law to see God; But the people in the pews in Corinth - and in Heliopolis, for that matter - do not look at Moses and the Law, but at God himself; God who lives in his temple, in the community of Jesus' followers.

3 We are being transformed from glory to glory

When Moses met with God and received the Ten Commandment, his face was radiant from Gods glory - but he covered his face because God's glory was just temporary.

As ordinary Christians we do not need to cover our faces, Paul says, because we reflect the Lord's glory permanently and it even increases.

Paul writes, "we all, with unveiled faces, reflect the Lord's glory." If you look God, as it were, in the face, your own face changes. It is a law of life that we become like the people we gaze at. People hero-worship someone and begin to reflect his ways.

The reference to unveiled faces reflecting the glory of God is a metaphor - surely. It is about the presence of God and the impact of God on our life.

"We are being transformed into his likeness", to use the words of Paul.

We are being transformed to be more like Jesus Christ. This shows that Paul does not advocate a loose or liberal lifestyle. It is not that his orientation on Jesus Christ instead of the law, creates a lifestyle of 'let us enjoy, it does not matter how we live.'

Instead, facing Jesus Christ makes us into the humanity before the fall of Adam and Eve. A renewed humanity that serves God - because Jesus Christ our Lord, changes our lives.

And we all, as one people of God, stare God in the face and therefore our 'faces' are being changed from glory to glory. The presence of God is ever more obvious.

So the orientation on Jesus transforms our lives - much more than what the law could accomplish.

This process of transformation sounds quite vague and mystical, as it is the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

But this change is very concrete and it is educational. Our mind is being changed by focussing on God, by learning from him through his word, in church, in books, by other people, and this process is helped by the presence of the Spirit in our life; this transforms our behavior. More and more we think and do as Jesus teaches us to think and do.

In this, the law does have a role to play; not those elements of the law that were meant to set Israel apart, or the laws that were purely useful in the agricultural society of Israel 3000 years ago.

But the moral laws, they hold up a standard for behavior; Jesus perfectly explained and exemplified this. His life shows us the real meaning of the law.

So we must not think that we can play Jesus, and Paul off against the law. Jesus and Paul often enough hold rules and laws up to us, to remind us of what God wants and of who we are. But Jesus is a much clearer, a cleaner mirror who helps us to see the will of God and to see ourselves.

You are part of God's great project of the renewal of humankind. Your lives reflect the glory of God. First as you are created by Him; secondly because you are redeemed by him; and also, because you are being changed to be like Him.

So look at your brothers and sisters, and you see Jesus in their faces; they are imperfect, yes. But so what? When others look at you or me, they see the same imperfections.

We do not need to say too much about the imperfections of others - Those others are probably just as aware of their sins and bad habits as you are of yours. So we better be gracious to each other and to ourselves, and instead of pointing at each other's flaws, we better direct each other to spending time with Jesus Christ.

Those dark spots in ourselves and in others, it is good to see them, to be aware of them, and then to change. But this change happens mostly by looking in the bright face of Jesus Christ. That light discovers who we are.

He is the shining sun in whose light the dark spots become extra visible; and with his light he pierces our hearts and changes us.

We, as God's new humanity, are a reflection of the glory of God. This does not deny our weaknesses, but it focuses on God's overwhelming glory, and we are in the process of change, to reflect his glory more and more. To be evermore like Him.

Paul says these things to people who created troubles in the church in Corinth. He surely has enough to criticize them for - but he does this in a climate of total acceptance of the other as God's handiwork and as the temple where God resides.

He does this, because it is a reality - and also because all of us, we change most when we are in an environment of grace and love, not when we are being criticized and told how wrong we are.

Conclusion

So, concluding, let us orient our lives to Jesus Christ. God's laws are good, but Jesus Christ is God himself.

This focus on Jesus instead of on laws, does not make us serve God less; it makes us obey more - as we are directly related to God himself through Jesus Christ.

God is in the proces of renewing humanity, and he does this through his church. Each person in his church is part of Gods new humanity - you are. But so are all others. See the presence of God reflected in each other. We are all new people of the New Covenant of God.

Amen