

2 Corinthians 3: 7Now 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, fading though it was, 8will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? 9If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! 10For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. 11And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

12Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold... 18And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Dear Friends in Christ,

GLORIOUS CHRIST—GLORIOUS CHRISTIANS

The Ten Commandments. In catechism class we spend quite a bit of time every year talking about and learning about the Ten Commandments. Over the years, they have become a contentious issue. In our nation they were once displayed often and freely in public places. Less so now, yet they are still found in many public places, including—partially—in the US Supreme Court building. Without getting lost in the weeds and legal arguments, court decisions have said that the Ten Commandments are still allowed in public places, basically if they are displayed as they pertain to our American legal system, and not as a religious document. To which the Christian responds, “If The Ten Commandments isn’t a religious document, then what is it?” But in a sense, this points out the influence of the commandments—our ever less and less religious society still grudgingly recognizes that these Ten Commandments are foundational to our system of law. They don’t recognize the true importance of the Ten Commandments, but they still have to grant them some importance.

Well, what does this have to do with our Bible reading this morning? This reading was written to people who were misunderstanding the importance of the Ten Commandments. The Apostle Paul had gotten a Christian congregation going in the city of Corinth. Then he had moved on to start other churches. But you know how groups of people act: When the authority figure is away, the agitators will play. And so, in his absence, some in that Christian group started to mess with what Paul had preached about Jesus. Part of their spiel was that the Law, the Ten Commandments, is where it’s at. Jesus is well and good. But the essence of godliness, these false teachers taught, is obedience and rule-following.

That’s where a lot of people are at. Not a few people who declare they are Christian, rarely show up at a church or support any group of Christians, yet they still get pretty worked up whenever there is a court case about the Ten Commandments. That’s not

Christianity in practice, that's the sort of sham Christianity that is in the crosshairs of our reading.

Christ's chosen apostle to the Corinthians, Paul, took issue with this. Now, since his opponents were wrongly emphasizing the Ten Commandments, we might expect Paul to belittle the Ten Commandments. Maybe he would say that we should ditch them. Maybe they don't matter. Paul didn't say any of that. He said they are glorious. To point out how glorious, in our reading in 2 Corinthians 3, he takes us back to today's Old Testament reading, Exodus 34.

Now Mr. Amling did a fine job of reading the Old Testament reading. But did you know what he was talking about? Moses, stone tablets, a glowing face, a veil? It's an obscure little corner of the Bible. Well, to get us started on understanding this, let me ask you this question (it's kind of a trick question): Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai stone tablets with the Ten Commandments engraved on them. How many stone tablets did Moses bring down? The correct answer is... four. You see, the first time Moses came down the mountain, he came down with two stone tablets. On the tablets was the core of the agreement between God and Israel, the Ten Commandments. But when Moses came down, he found the entire tribe indulging in a boozy festival to an idol. They had broken the covenant. In zeal for the LORD, Moses took the two tablets in his hands and he smashed them to bits. God himself was so angry that many Israelites died. They had broken their pledge.

After things got sorted out, God told Moses to climb Mt Sinai again. This is where the Old Testament reading takes place. Again, he was given two stone tablets, tablets three and four, engraved with the Ten Commandments. This second time, God underlined his point that these words were from God. When Moses came down to read the Ten Commandments, the Israelites not only got the Ten Commandments, but they got a guy with a glowing face—just like you might see in a movie. When Aaron the chief priest and all the people saw Moses, "*they were afraid to come near him.*" But he persuaded them. Finally they came near, they listened, and then when he was done, Moses' face began to lose its shine. At which point Moses put a veil over his face.

Now this might make us ask, "Why then?" The point was that watching Moses' face lose its God-given glow would be dishonorable. Maybe we could compare it to pictures of an actress without her makeup, or a four-star general in his pajamas. Those sorts of things don't get out because they erode a person's authority. Moses not having the veil would be sort of like, "Oh, now it's just Moses. Never mind about him."

Paul's point is this: These Ten Commandments have a glory and serve a purpose, but their glory is short-lived temporary. These Ten Commandments have a glory and serve a purpose, but by themselves they always end up working death.

There are two ways to be a religious person. There is the Christian faith, and then there are all the rest of the religions. All the rest of religions say that the Ten Commandments—or something like them—is the core: "Do and do; rule on rule." Human obedience is their fundamental value. Buddhism's Eightfold Path pins its hope on human obedience. Islam's Four Pillars make eternal life depend on human obedience. The Judaism of Jesus' day,

even though it had the true word of God, had in many quarters drifted into the same work-righteous religion which it has become completely in our day.

By nature, every human being has this tendency, actually it is stronger than a tendency, it is a default setting to put our confidence in a system built on our own deeds. If we are not continually shown otherwise by God's Word, Christians also do this. We drift into organizing our Christian lives around an attainable set of rules that we feel like we can keep, and call it good. We call ourselves good.

But we're not. The religion of commandments is the religion of death, as the word of God tells us here. Or as Romans 3 tells us, "*No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*"

However, the Christian has a message that is neither temporary, nor a source of death. Let me read the first three verses again, "***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, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!***"

This is the ministry that Christ's people have the joy and privilege to proclaim. It is here called "***The ministry that brings righteousness.***" Just a bit later, Paul explains how that ministry of righteousness works. He says in chapter 5, "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" It is the great exchange. One who had no sin, took up all our sin. And now, unburdened by our sin, we are righteous before God. This is glorious!

Now, not sin, not even our own sin, condemns us. Now, all of Satan's accusations saying that we are unfit for heaven bounce off of the bullet-proof robe of Christ's righteousness that we wear. Now, even death does not frighten us, because Christ's people know that death is only a threshold, a doorway, into God's presence. This is glorious!

This is the glory shown to the three disciples Peter, James and John, on that mountaintop transfiguration. The humble rabbi Jesus for a moment revealed his glory as the Son of God. But his real glory was not the shining clothes or the glowing cloud. Jesus' true glory was revealed as he spoke with two of the greatest names of Israel's past, Moses and Elijah. On that mountaintop the three of them spoke, as Luke puts it, "*about his departure which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.*" Jesus' glory would be and is his arrest, his torture on a cross, his abandonment by God the Father, his death, and then his resurrection. That is Jesus' great glory, and it will not ever fade away. It is a once for all sacrifice for sin, for the sins of the scoundrel and the church goer.

This glory Jesus achieved through his great suffering is the cornerstone of our faith and it is the focus of our mid-week Wednesday services. I invite you—no, I more than invite you, I encourage you, I strongly encourage you to come to our Wednesday evening services. At no other time of the year do we meditate on the all-important last 24 hours of Jesus life as in our mid-week Lenten services. If you go only to our Sunday services throughout the year, you will never hear the Scriptures that describe the Last Supper, the

Garden of Gethsemane, the high priest's courtyard, Pilate's courtroom, Golgotha. These Wednesday services aren't supposed to be just for the really serious, for the retired, the bored. These are supposed to be for all of you, and for all who aren't here. Come this Wednesday to our Ash Wednesday service, and to each of the next five Wednesdays, and then Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. God will make it worth your while. This is Jesus' glory and your glory.

Now we get to verse 12, ***“Therefore...”*** Now when you read that word in your Bible, “therefore,” it is time to pay attention. It's an important word. All the information that we have been given to this point—its meaning is condensed into a sentence: ***“Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.”*** Paul could never concede an inch to the commandment-based preachers trying to muscle into the Corinthian church, and he wouldn't apologize about it. He was bold. They were preaching a message of death. He had a message of life! And you, knowing the glory of Christ, can be very bold too! Be bold in speech and conviction because however good or not so good at arguing your point might be, you are the one with the saving truth.

The first “therefore” about Jesus' glory is that we are bold in faith. The second part of the “therefore” in verse 18. Now this is a complicated verse, so I will read just the core of it: ***“We are being transformed into [Jesus'] likeness with ever-increasing glory.”*** Let me read that again: ***“We are being transformed into [Jesus'] likeness with ever-increasing glory.”***

Sometimes it is said that married people resemble each other more as they age together. I don't know what you think, but I think that is a beautiful thing. The longer you live as a Christian, do you know whom you begin to resemble? Christ Jesus. It is natural that as we live longer under the grace of Jesus, we begin to look more like him.

So, two questions. First: Is this true of you? Are you more like Jesus than you were a year ago, five years ago? If you can't say “Yes,” you need to have some time with God over this issue.

Second: What about you does not resemble Jesus? What is your reputation, your bearing toward others, your attitude toward God? This is not to deny that each of us has a different personality, a different lifetime of experiences. When you appreciate what Jesus has done for you, you will change. You will look a little more like Jesus each day. And that, too, is a beautiful thing.

May you glory always, not in the laws and rules of God, but in our Savior. And may his glory transform you to be bold in faith, and more Christlike by the day. Amen.