

Removing the Veil

II Corinthians 3:4-18

We live in an era where information is everywhere, and that, of course, means the facts of the gospel are more widely available than at any time in human history. Satellite TV programs and cell phone apps are making it possible for the truth about Christ to be heard even in countries where Christianity is illegal. And in our own country, many congregations have portions of their worship services posted online – if recent experience is any accurate measure, if you count up all the people who will view today's sermon, they would be enough to fill up the rest of this room – if we could get everyone here on Sunday morning.

So, if the news about Jesus is everywhere, and if the truth about Jesus Christ is in fact such good news, why doesn't everyone believe it? That's one of the things Paul sets out to explain in today's passage. For in verse 15, he makes it plain that, when many people hear what the Scriptures say about Jesus, a veil lies over their hearts. It's a little bit like when you have a bad cold and your ears are stopped up – lots of people hear the truth about Christ, but they just can't make any sense out of it.

So, what is this veil, this barrier that prevents people from really understanding the truth about Jesus? Well, in today's passage Paul is referring specifically to the problem that his own kinsmen, the Jewish people had at the time. For the fact is that, even though Jesus showed up to the Jewish people, and even though He did mighty miracles and clearly explained how His life and ministry fulfilled the Old Testament Scriptures in so many ways, many of them didn't believe Him. Instead, verse 14 says that their minds were hardened. In short, they preferred the legalism of trying to follow the Law of Moses to the grace offered to them in the gospel.

And in this preference, they were not alone. In fact, legalism continues to be quite a popular alternative to the doctrines of grace, even among people who would call themselves Christians. But what is so attractive about legalism? Why do people want to believe that they can save themselves by the things they do or the things they leave undone?

Well, on its most basic level, all forms of legalism appeal to human pride. That's because legalism, in whatever particular form it takes, tells us that we are in control of our eternal destiny. It sells us on the comforting fiction that if we follow certain rules, if we do certain things and leave certain other things undone, we can assure ourselves of salvation. In short, legalism leaves us in the driver's seat on the road to Heaven.

But legalism is not ultimately satisfying, especially the sort which tries to keep all of the Law of Moses. Oh, some people can kid themselves by being selective about what parts of the Law they want to observe. We might take pride that we don't drink, don't smoke, don't chew and don't go with girls who do. And in that pride we might look down on others who don't follow whatever dumbed-down moral code we have carved for ourselves out of the pages of Scripture.

But such pride is easily punctured when we take a peek at the parts of the Law we have so conveniently ignored. Oh, we might congratulate ourselves on not cheating on our wives, but then Jesus goes and says that even thinking lustful thoughts is also wrong – and how many of us can avoid that? We might take pride in how friendly and welcoming we are, but then Jesus says we have to love our enemies – how many of us even try to do that? No, the problem with putting your faith in keeping

the Law is that, the more you know about it, the more impossible it is. Legalism may put us in the driver's seat, but that doesn't mean it can give us directions to Heaven.

That's what Martin Luther found out when he became a monk. He kept trying and trying to bring all his actions, thoughts, and feelings into line with the Scripture, but he just couldn't do it. In fact, his attempt at personal perfection got down into such details that on one occasion he spent six hours in a row making his confession to another priest. The burden of his sins became so great that he admitted he actually hated God. In short, Luther ran headlong into the truth of verse 6 – without the grace of God, the letter of the Law is deadly. And verse 7 agrees – apart from Christ, the Law is only a minister of death.

Of course, the ancient Jews weren't the only people who were guilty of such pride, of trying to save themselves by their good deeds. The Gentile pagans living in Paul's day were just as determined to be in control of their eternal destiny, but instead of trying to keep the Law perfectly, they performed all sorts of rituals, all sorts of acts of worship to appease all sorts of gods, so that those gods would, in turn, give them what they wanted.

Now, before we condemn all this as so much ancient silliness, we need to understand why it was so attractive – like legalism, paganism appeals to human pride. It comforts us with the fiction that we are in the driver's seat, that we are in charge of the circumstances of our lives. Pagans believed that all they had to do was to find the right balance of offerings and rituals, so that they could get all the right gods on their side at the right time, so that everything would work out right for them. But however complicated or convoluted paganism might have been, it was still all about being in control.

And modern people still do these kinds of things, and not just the folks who stick pins in voodoo dolls. Lots of baseball players believe if they wear a rally hat, or in the case of Mississippi State last year, a rally banana, their team will get a hit. Other folks carry a rabbit's foot, hoping it will ward off dangers. Still others avoid walking under ladders or opening umbrellas indoors or breaking a mirror for fear of bad luck.

But even otherwise scientific people can fall into a similar mania for control. How many of us believe that if we just eat the right foods and get the right amount of exercise, we can guarantee our health? And it works – until a flu virus comes along. Or how many people believe that if we in the United States cut back on carbon emissions, we can reduce the temperature of the planet – no matter how many spots the sun has or how much coal the Chinese burn?

Yes it is this mania for control, this proud insistence that we don't need any help, this certainty that we are basically in charge of our lives – this is what lies at the heart of the veil that prevents so many people, Jew and Gentile, ancient and modern, from embracing the good news about Jesus. The sad truth is that even though we don't have the directions to Heaven, we still want to sit in the driver's seat. However much a fiction our control of our own lives and destinies may turn out to be, we just don't want to let go of it.

But that sort of letting go, that sort of giving up control, that sort of turning away from ourselves and our own desires is the only way we will ever be able to see things the way they really are, and the only way to see Jesus as He really is. In fact, Paul explains in verse 16 that only turning to the Lord can lift the veil from our eyes. For turning to the Lord, submitting to the Lordship of Christ requires, at the

very least, that we stop trying to be the Lord of our own lives, right? Bowing the knee to Christ as Lord has to involve confessing that we are not in charge of ourselves now, and that we can't control our eternal destiny by whatever we do or leave undone. It means getting out of the driver's seat and letting Jesus drive.

Moreover, when we confess Christ as our Savior, that means adopting a whole new perspective on ourselves. It means admitting that we can't possibly live up to the standards of the Law of Moses, no matter how hard we try. It means coming to grips with the fact that we are not basically good people who just need a little touch-up here and there. Instead, confessing Christ as our Savior means realizing that we are nothing more than unworthy sinners in need of radical transformation. It means confessing that there's no self-help program than can fix us, no bribe we can offer to any god or gods that will get us in good with them. Instead, coming to Christ means admitting that the cross alone is sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world – and that there's nothing we can add to that perfect sacrifice.

Let's face it – that's a hard pill for any proud sinner to swallow. But it is only in turning away from ourselves, away from our efforts to be in control, and turning toward God that we can ever experience the righteousness Paul talks about in verse 9. For the only way to be right in God's sight is not to earn it ourselves and not to try to bribe Him to get on his good side, but to let Christ clothe us in His own righteousness, a righteousness He earned by living a sinless life, a righteousness He credits to us because of His perfect sacrificial death. It's hard for proud sinners like us to admit that we need someone else to make us perfect, but it turns out only God's free, unmerited grace can supply us the righteousness we need.

But once we've turned away from our pride and accepted God's grace, once we've turned away from our own attempts at control and surrendered to Christ as Lord and Savior, once we have moved on from the frustration of legalism and the fear of paganism we can have a new hope, a hope that is no longer in the things we can amass or the perfection we attempt to achieve in this life. Instead, those who trust in Jesus have hope in Christ, Who saves us from our sins today, and who will complete our redemption and make all things new when He comes again. It is this hope, based on the certainty of His resurrection, which leads us not only to a humble life, but to bold proclamation of the truth.

And believe it or not, getting out of the driver's seat and letting Jesus take us where we need to go is also the only way to true freedom, to true liberty. For remember, those who insist on maintaining control, those who keep on repeating their unrealistic attempts to make themselves acceptable in the sight of God are only doomed to frustration. They're in the driver's seat, but all they can do is wander around, hopelessly lost. But once we let go of the keys and let Jesus drive, we can actually go somewhere. We can actually enjoy the freedom of movement, the freedom of change, and change for the better. Those who trust in Christ are thus no longer slaves to our own desires, slaves to sin. Instead, by giving Jesus control of our lives we become free, free to be the people who God created all of us to be – people not of selfishness, but of love, true love for Him and true love for one another.

And it is only as we turn away from ourselves, from our desires, from our attempts to be in control, it is only as we show such selfless, unconditional, sacrificial love that we can truly reflect the glory of God. For isn't that the way Jesus lived when He walked on this earth? In fact, didn't Jesus reveal the love and the mercy and the grace of God most clearly when He went to the cross for us?

But how is all of this possible? How can we give up control of our lives and, as Carrie Underwood has so famously sung, let Jesus take the wheel? How can we truly demonstrate the same sort of self-sacrificial love He has for the Father and for others? Paul tells us that too, in verses 6 and 17: it is only when we trust in Christ as Lord and Savior that He fills us with His Holy Spirit, the Spirit which gives life. For it is only the Holy Spirit Who can live the life of Christ within us – a life in perfect agreement with the Law of Moses, a life that is right in the sight of the only true God, a life that is truly free from all the deceptions and perversions of sin, a life lived in the right way that is on the right road.

So, let's hand the keys to Jesus. Let's get out of the driver's seat. And by the power of His Holy Spirit, let's allow Jesus to live His life in us and through us, and take us where He wants us to go.