

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Masks-Off

(2 Corinthians 3)

A Northwest Core Value: Relating Genuinely (Masks-Off Relating)

We greatly value genuine, loving relationships where we are honest about our sin and our deep need for God and each other. God works powerfully in the midst of our community when the masks come off and we share what is really going on in our lives (2 Corinthians 3:12-18).

***A message designed to equip you to take a next step in your walk with Jesus.

Introduction: Veiled and unveiled...

Every year during the Christmas season - at some point - we'll sing, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing", a great song with a catchy tune and memorable lyrics, especially in the second stanza.

*Christ, by highest heaven adored;
Christ, the everlasting Lord.
Late in time behold him come,
Offspring of the virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see,
Hail, the incarnate Deity;
Pleased, as man, with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel!
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King!"*

This hymn by Charles Wesley captures the essential message of Christmas and moves us right into the Christmas spirit by majoring on two thoughts.

First, note the emphasis on Jesus' deity and lordship. Adored by highest heaven. He is the everlasting Lord. He is the incarnate deity - Emmanuel, God with us.

Second, notice the stress on veiling, what Philip Yancey called "divine shyness".¹

An unfiltered glimpse of Jesus' actual identity - unveiled deity! - would have been overwhelming. So, at Bethlehem, God masked His Son in human flesh to accommodate our weakness. His masking / veiling was a good thing. In the veiled Jesus we see all we need to see of God.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, so it's a very fitting time to highlight Christmas. But today's message isn't about Christmas. It's about veils and masks.

Jesus' human veiling was necessary for us to "see" God in a way that clearly and safely communicated to us. But there is another kind of veiling that is as unhelpful to seeing God as Jesus' veiling was helpful.

This morning, I'll be highlighting what is for us here at Northwest, a cherished value.

We refer to it as "genuine" or "masks-off" relating, and the passage where this concept is described is found in Paul's second letter to the Christians in the city of Corinth.

Different rules for different eras...

Paul takes some time in the second and third chapters of this letter to contrast two ways of living: the Moses way and the Jesus way. He has experienced both and he wants us to know that the Jesus way is waaaay better.

¹ In Disappointment with God, chapter 15.

Throughout time God has dealt with people in various ways in various eras. In each era there has been a certain way things got done.

He dealt with people in one way in the Garden of Eden. Then He dealt with people in a slightly different way in the age of Abraham and his descendants.

In the future, when Jesus reigns on the earth for a thousand years (we call it The Millennium), a new set of rules will apply.

And there was another significant age, one with very distinctive rules and procedures.

It began with Moses and lasted fifteen hundred years. During that era God dealt with His people according to a certain playbook. The policies were all laid out in the Old Testament and the administration was called "Law."

Law reigned supreme from Moses until Jesus. And with Jesus, there came a whole new way of doing things, new wineskins into which He would pour His new wine of grace and truth.

Paul's experience of life, the Jesus way, was all about...

The Jesus way...

- **...UNFAILING GRATITUDE - [2:14] *But thanks be to God;***
Paul was always thankful to God for His abundant blessings in Christ.

- **...UNVARYING SUCCESS - [2:14] *...who always leads us in triumph in Christ;***
Not that everything Paul tried "worked", but that in every situation, Christ worked through him.

- **...UNFORGETTABLE IMPACT - [2:14] *...manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.***

No matter where Paul went and no matter who he was with, his life made an impact for Jesus.

- **UNIMPEACHABLE INTEGRITY - [17] *For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God;*** and

Paul didn't "peddle" the Gospel. He was honest and straightforward, relying NOT on his own cleverness, plans, or techniques, but on God's power to make a difference.

- **UNDENIABLE REALITY - [3:2] *You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; [3] being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.***

God used Paul to bring about change in others.

This life Paul describes is life as Jesus intends it for each of us who have come to know Him by faith.

If it is not the *average* Christian life, it is the *norm* He had in mind when He spoke of an "**abundant life**" in John's Gospel.

It is also the life that the prophet Jeremiah envisioned, hundreds of years before Jesus was born, when he wrote about a "New Covenant" that God would make with people.²

This new arrangement was on Jesus' mind when He was with His followers on the night before He died.

At the Last Supper, while He was distributing the cup of blessing to His disciples, He said, **[Luke 22:20] "This cup is the New Covenant in My blood."** (We'll hear those words today as we take the Lord's Supper at the end.)

Jesus' death and resurrection ushered in the beginning of the New Covenant. And the life Paul described in the verses we just read is New Covenant living.

² See Jeremiah 31:31-34.

It is a life where all the resources come from God, not us. That's the essence of the New Covenant. A powerful life for God is not sourced in me, not in you, but in Him.

That being the case, we need to learn how to unleash the power of the New Covenant - and we will see all that this morning.

On the way to explaining that unleashing, Paul draws contrasts between Old Covenant living and New Covenant living.

First, he calls the Old Covenant (the Moses way) the way of death and condemnation.³

The New vs. the Old Covenant (vv. 7-11)

The Old Covenant / Moses' Ministry

The DEATH and CONDEMNATION ministry (vv. 7, 9)

[7] But if THE MINISTRY OF DEATH, in letters engraved on stones...[9] For if THE MINISTRY OF CONDEMNATION...

These are pretty radical comments about the Law of Moses, considering that they are coming from Paul, a card-carrying Jew.

But they're not negative and Paul is not saying that the Law was intended to kill. The Law gave life to those who obeyed it.

Moses wrote, ***[Leviticus 18:5] So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the Lord.***

There was nothing bad about the Mosaic Law.⁴ The problem, though, is that an inflexible Law becomes lethal when it collides with sinful people.

Nobody could perfectly keep the requirements of the Mosaic Law, so it condemned everyone.

That's the function of law in our own society. Keep it and everything is great. Break it and you pay a fine or land in jail. It condemns. That's the Old Covenant.

Paul also affirms something else we know to be true, that the Old Covenant came with glory.

The FADING GLORY ministry (v. 7; Exodus 19)

When the Law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, there was ***[Exodus 19:16]...thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled...[18]...[and] Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently.***

Now that's glory! And there's more. Paul mentions the glory of Moses' face.

[7]...the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was. (and much more about that glowing face shortly)

But there's one more thing about the Old Covenant that we dare not miss: It was temporary.

The TEMPORAL ministry (vv. 10-11)

[10] For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. [11] For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.

The Law was never meant to be permanent. It was on its way out from the moment it was established.

³ Specifically, the system of Laws; the sacrifices are not so much in view here.

⁴ In Romans 7 Paul says that the Law is "***holy, righteous, and good***".

God never intended that The Moses Way would be the final way. And in contrast to all that was true about the Old Covenant, we have the New Covenant.

First, if the Mosaic Law covenant was glorious, the New is super-glorious.

The New Covenant / Jesus' Ministry

The ministry of the Spirit

[8] how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?

The Mosaic Law was written on tablets of stone. Today, the Spirit of God bypasses stones and engraves His truth on our hearts. That's more glorious than the thunder and lightning on Mount Sinai.

Second, the New Covenant is about grace and salvation.

The ministry of righteousness

[9] much more does THE MINISTRY OF RIGHTEOUSNESS abound in glory

The Old Covenant condemned. The New Covenant justifies. The Old Covenant was the covenant of death. The New Covenant is life-giving.⁵

Finally, while the Old Covenant was temporary, the New Covenant is not.

The eternal ministry

[11] For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.

The New Covenant is permanent. It remains. God will never inaugurate a "*New, Improved New Covenant!*" This Covenant under which we live is also the Last Covenant.⁶

Summary: NEW vs. OLD

Looked at by itself, a full moon on a clear night can appear pretty bright. But, the brightness of the sun at high noon eclipses the "light" of the moon.

Looked at by itself, Mt. Sinai is a scene of glory. But, in comparison with the New Covenant under which we now serve God, the Old Covenant's glory is only lunar.

You and I are richly blessed because we get to serve God under a new, glorious, life-giving, eternal covenant.

Now, as is the case with every truth we encounter in God's Word, there is a "point" to this New Covenant stuff. And Paul points out the point as he continues.

New Covenant Living vs. Veiled Living (vv. 12-18)

A Vision for Openness (v. 12)

[12] Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech

Our hope is that we might participate in all the blessings of the New Covenant and that God would use us powerfully in the lives of others for His glory. (2 Corinthians 2:14--3:6)

This great "hope" drives us to live in a certain way.

The word Paul uses to describe that new "way" (The Jesus Way) is a Greek word that we translate here, "boldness". ("parrhesia" - *παρρησια*).

⁵ Under the New Covenant, there is no condemnation at all (Romans 8:1).

⁶ Hebrews 10:6-13 - it is better because it is last; also 13:20.

It is a fascinating word that is also rendered “*openness*” elsewhere in the New Testament.

The thought is *transparency*. Nothing hidden. When we are living according to the New Covenant, we have nothing to hide, nothing to prove and nothing to defend. We don’t “fake it.” We live openly.⁷

All this understanding about openness is ours when we embrace the truth of Jesus’ New Covenant that says, “*Everything comes from God; nothing comes from me.*”

Paul goes on to illustrate the openness that we can have under in Jesus by highlighting the amazing lack of openness seen in the life of Moses, the one who received the Old Covenant from God.

Veils Violate Boldness/Openness (vv. 13-15)

Moses veiled himself (v. 13)

Moses and the veil (from Exodus 34)

[13a] and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face...

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai after receiving the Law, he didn’t know that his face literally shone from exposure to the presence of God.

Not surprisingly, his shining face frightened the Jews, and they wouldn’t come near him.

So, Moses responded to their fears by covering his face with a veil, something that masked what was going on with his face.

From then on, whenever he went into the tabernacle to speak with the Lord, he would remove the veil. (The way I think of it is that this would “re-charge” his face so that it shone bright again.) And then, when he came out from the presence of the Lord, he would put the veil on again as he spoke to the people.

In reading the account from Exodus, it is clear that Moses was acting to protect the people.

But, here in 2 Corinthians, Paul gives a second purpose to Moses’ veiling. It *protected*, sure. But the veiling also *concealed*.

Paul and Moses’ veil (v. 13)

[13] and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away.

What did it conceal?

It concealed the fading nature of Old Covenant glory. Moses didn’t want the Israelites to see that the glory of the Old Covenant faded. Why?

Well, we aren’t told why he didn’t want the people to see that the glory of the Old Covenant didn’t last. But we can use a little sanctified imagination.

I think it’s very likely that at least part of the reason was that Moses wanted to preserve his status as a special mediator between the people and God. If the Jews saw his face without that glow, he would be less esteemed as a leader. (This is a classic case of ILS - Insecure Leader Syndrome.)

Or it might be that he was concerned that IF the people saw that the glory on his face faded, they wouldn’t pay attention to God. They wouldn’t take God’s Law seriously. So, on went the veil to help God out.

⁷ Why? Because we know that all by ourselves we aren’t “adequate” to make the kind of life-changing, world-changing impact that we long to make; AND God is super-adequate to make that kind of impact; AND His adequacy is available to us because of the New Covenant relationship we have with Him through Jesus.

We really don't know with *"thus saith the Lord"* certainty why Moses didn't want the people to see that the glory faded.

I suspect that both motives were at work. He wanted the people to take God and His Law seriously. And (speaking as someone with some experience with ILS), he wanted the people to take him seriously.

Whatever the main reason, Paul says that Moses was not being "open" ("bold" "transparent" "authentic" "genuine") like we are called to be under the New Covenant.

Remember. After a while, there was no real reason to have kept the veil on. The glory faded. His face looked like everyone else's face.

But Moses kept the veil on anyway. He was hiding the fact that the Old Covenant glory was a temporary glory.

And, while Moses may have intended the veil as a protector, he may have thought that keeping the veil on would increase impact for God, the actual effect of Moses' veiling was that the *"minds* [of the Jews] *were hardened.*"

Others are veiled, too (vv. 14-15)

[14] But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. [15] But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart

Now, think with me here. In what way were the minds of the Old Testament Jews hardened?

They were *"hardened"* into thinking that the Old Covenant, the covenant of Law, was God's final word.

Had Moses not put on the veil, the Jews would have been initially bowled over by the glory of his shining face. They would not have been protected. They would have been frightened.

BUT they also would have eventually seen the glory fade.

And, in seeing Moses' face become un-shiny, they would have understood that the Covenant of Law offered only a temporary glory. THAT would have prompted them to look for something *else*, something *more*, something *permanent* to follow the Law.

Had they seen the Old Covenant glory fade, they would have looked for a New Covenant.

To put it bluntly, Moses' veil kept His fellow Jews from looking for a permanent message of grace and forgiveness and personal transformation, a message that is core to Jesus' New Covenant.

This story of Moses' veil has serious implications for us.

Reflection time...

If we are going to live as Jesus intends us to live, we must live with no veil. Nothing hidden. No pretense. No attempt to pretend that we are all "together." No defending ourselves and nothing to prove.

When Moses put on and kept on a veil, he may have saved his reputation as God's representative. But the effect was to harden hearts against the message of Jesus. When we put on a veil, the effect will be exactly the same.

People who come in contact with Christians who are masked, living-in-denial, pretenders, actually harden people against believing in Jesus.

And we put on a veil when we convey to others that we have everything together - *"No problems. I've got this."*

We put on a veil when we think that if we try hard enough, we can make Kingdom-of-God sized impact in and of ourselves.

That's all Old Covenant stuff. That's me, doing the best I can. And that kind of living always results in a puny, eternally worthless, fading glory.

The alternative - taking the veil off - is to live openly. Freely admit struggles. Confess inadequacy. Exult in failure. Embrace the beautiful truth, *"It's not about me; it's all about Jesus."*

It's that kind of living that unleashes New Covenant power and allows God's super-adequacy to flow through us.

And we all know this is true. We all believed in veils-off living on the day we put our faith in Jesus for eternal life.

Unveiled, We are Transformed (vv. 16-18)

"No veil" = LIBERTY! (vv. 16-17)

[16] but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. [17] Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

When you first turned to Jesus, it was because (at some level) you understood that you could never measure up before God.

You became convinced that it is only what Christ has done for you that would enable you to stand in His presence.

And so, you came, in faith, confessing your inadequacy.

You came to God owning the truth, *"Everything coming from God; nothing coming from me"* - even if you had never heard of the New Covenant.

On the day that you were eternally saved from your sin, you accepted the idea that it is not what you do that will save, but what Christ did.

And every day from that day forward you are confronted with the choice of continuing to live in the liberty of New Covenant truth or of reverting to the Old Covenant way and putting on a veil.

The Jesus Way or The Moses Way. That is the choice. There is no future in following Moses, believing that impact and power is dependent on ME, on YOU.

Now, listen to Paul's mouth-watering closing argument for New Covenant, unveiled / masks-off living.

"No veil" = transformation (v. 18)

[18] But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

Keep the veil of self-adequacy on and nothing changes. But, when you remove the veil (live openly) and look to Jesus, God will transform you into a powerful, loving Christ-follower.

Unfailing gratitude, unvarying success, unforgettable impact, unimpeachable integrity, and undeniable reality becomes yours.

We are transformed because there is something about an unveiled look at our holy and loving God that deeply, profoundly changes us.

Conclusion:

The *strategy* we have been raised with, the *mindset* that holds sway in so many places, the *thinking* prompted by the hater of your soul is this:

For me to be accepted and effective, I must appear capable. If I would be successful, I must convince myself and others of my adequacy.

The New Covenant (The Jesus Way) turns that thinking on its head and says that if we will admit our **IN**adequacy, we can have God's **SUPER**adequacy at the point of our need.

Gods' transforming power is unleashed when we get real and vulnerable, when we get open and genuine.

Everything changes...

...in a marriage, when a husband and a wife take off their masks and get real with each other under the Lordship of Christ.

...in a home when parents and kids become open, loving and respectful.

...in a Care Group with unveiled faces, to where it's no longer friends enjoying a nice time together, but brothers and sisters being used by God to prompt transformation in each other.

Nothing changes when the masks are on.

And it starts when one person - YOU - takes off the veil and confesses sin, admits to weakness and fears and failures, or shares a burden.

At this church, in our homes, in our personal lives, we will not be as Moses. We will live boldly, transparently, so that God's transforming power will be unleashed in us.