

A NEW COVENANT**2 CORINTHIANS 3:4-18**

Ken Canfield writes about something that happened on a family vacation. His daughter, Sarah, got a little ornery and pushed her sister, Hannah. "Did you push your sister?" he asked. "No," Sarah lied. Since this was becoming a growing pattern for Sarah, Ken decided to take a walk with her to get to the bottom of things. "Sarah," he told her, "I'm really disappointed with your behavior. What do you need to do about it?" He expected Sarah to tell him she needed to stop lying or apologize to her sister, but instead, with tears in her eyes, she said, "I need to ask Jesus to come into my heart." Ken was convicted by her answer. There he was, zeroing in on behavior modification, and his 6-year-old daughter had already recognized her need for an internal spiritual change. Ken was focused on morality. But Sarah was focused on the relationship that makes being good both possible and sincere. This morning, let's think about the new relationship God offers us through His Son, Jesus.

We're in the midst of a messages series on 2 Corinthians I'm calling "Cruciform: Living a Cross-Shaped Life." That word "cruciform" means anything that's made in the shape of a cross – a building, a work of art, a piece of jewelry. Your life and mine can also be cruciform or cross-shaped. When that happens, our everyday lives remind other people of what Jesus would do, what Jesus would say, how Jesus would treat people, and how Jesus would handle situations. A cruciform life resembles or reflects Jesus.

The great Christian leader, Paul, wrote two long letters to relatively new Christians in the Greek city of Corinth. What he wrote was impacted by the issues and controversies he and the church experienced. One controversy was initiated by teachers who came into the church after Paul left to evangelize other cities. This group of teachers were known as Judaizers. They were likely ethnically Jewish men who had become followers of Jesus, but they believed and taught that Christians needed to practice Judaism to really be followers of Jesus. You still needed to keep the Law of Moses. You still needed to observe the Passover and other Jewish religious ceremonies. Men still needed to be circumcised. All of this was still necessary to be right with God, to please God, to be accepted by God, and to get into Heaven.

Most of the Corinthian Christians were non-Jews, so they likely didn't know any better. Paul, however, had been as Jewish as you could get before becoming a Christian. If anyone might have insisted on the need to adopt the Jewish faith to be truly Christian, it would have been Paul. But after his conversion, God made it very plain to him that no one could ever be made right with God by keeping the OT Law. That only happened when anyone receives God's grace accessed by our faith. Having a Jewish background was a great blessing, yes, but Jews needed to be converted to Jesus just as much as non-Jews. All had sinned and fallen short of God's standards. Everyone needed to receive God's grace by faith. The Judaizers didn't much care for Paul or his approach to the Christian faith. They thought he was bad news. A heretic. They attacked his teaching, his reputation, and they did their best to destroy Paul's influence.

It helps to know all of that if you want to better understand why Paul wrote what he wrote in the 2 Corinthians passage we consider today. This passage is all about why something Paul called “the new covenant” was far better than the old covenant. What is a covenant? A covenant is an arrangement between two people through which they enter into a certain kind of relationship. Marriage might be the best example of a covenant. It establishes a certain kind of relationship between a man and a woman. The new covenant was a new way for human beings to have a relationship with God. It was related to – but very different from – the the old way human beings could try and relate to God. Here Paul contrasted this new covenant with the old covenant and showed why it was far better. Paul implied anyone who is living a cross-shaped life has discovered and is now living into this new way of relating to the God of the universe. He insisted that this new way of relating to God – this new covenant - was infinitely better than the old way. Paul pointed to at least five ways this new way to relate to God is vastly superior to the old way. First...

THE NEW WAY IS MORE WONDERFUL AND REFLECTS GOD’S GLORY BETTER.

Did you notice Paul mentioned Moses and the OT Law a lot in what we just read? Why? It was through Moses that the old way of relating to God was created. You can read all about it in the OT. After Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, they camped out in the wilderness near a mountain – Mt. Sinai. Moses went up to the top of the mountain and spend time alone with God. There, God gave Him the Ten Commandments and other laws and information. Now, Moses was in the actual presence of God during this very special time. One result was the fact his face literally and physically shone like a bright light. This absolutely freaked out the people of Israel. It filled them with great fear. Apparently, Moses started putting a veil over his face after he spent time with God and then removed it when he returned to speak with God. But Moses’ face didn’t continue to shine indefinitely. After he discontinued this direct interaction with God, Moses’ face gradually returned to normal.

That’s the historical background to what Paul wrote here. The old way of relating to God initiated by Moses was indeed wonderful and reflected God’s greatness and glory. “The old way... began with such glory that the people of Israel could not bear to look at Moses’ face. For his face shone with the glory of God, even though the brightness was already fading away.” (2 Cor. 3:7 NLT) What God did in and through Moses was God-given and God-blest. Yes, it was wonderful. Yes, it was full of God’s glory. But it couldn’t compare – Paul insisted – with what God had done now through Jesus’ death and resurrection. A completely new way to relate to God had been established and it was far superior to the old way. “If the old way, which brings condemnation, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new way, which makes us right with God! In fact, that first glory was not glorious at all compared with the overwhelming glory of the new way.” (2 Cor. 3:9-10 NLT) Well, what makes the new way of relating to God so much more wonderful and so much better than the old way? That’s what the rest of today’s message is about! A cruciform life – a life shaped by the cross of Jesus – has opted for this new way of relating to God because it is so much more wonderful and so far better than the old way. Second...

THE NEW WAY IS PERMANENT.

What God did in and through Moses – giving the people of Israel what we call the Ten Commandments, the Law, the elaborate sacrificial worship system – was never intended to be permanent. This old way of relating to God as it's described in the OT was temporary. Paul said here, "So if the old way, which has been replaced, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new, which remains forever!" (2 Cor. 3:11 NLT) Even the OT itself acknowledged God was going to do something new in the future that would replace the old way of relating to Him. The prophet Jeremiah announced what God had told him, "'The day is coming,' says the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant.... But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days,' says the LORD." (Jer. 31:31-33 NLT)

Why was the old covenant – the old way of relating to God – only temporary? It wasn't effective in achieving God's purpose of creating a way for people to have a relationship with Him. Instead of making us right with God, it provided – unintentionally - even greater reasons for God to reject us. Instead of resulting in our salvation, it sealed our condemnation. It didn't help to restore a personal relationship with God for anyone – Jew or non-Jew. Right from the start, it was meant to be only temporary. It was pointing to and leading up to Jesus. When He died and rose again, the old way of relating to God was no longer necessary or even appropriate. What God has done in and through Jesus – how Jesus paid the penalty for our sin at the cross and the empty tomb, how our sins are forgiven now and forever, how we now have direct access to God our Heavenly Father – that's what's become permanent. The new way lasts forever. So, a cruciform life has opted for what's permanent over what was temporary when it comes to how we must relate to God. Third...

THE NEW WAY MEANS RELATING TO GOD THROUGH AN INTERNAL CHANGE OF MY HEART.

Here's what the OT prophets had said about this new covenant. Jeremiah had said, "'But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days,' says the LORD. 'I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.'" (Jer. 31:33 NLT) Another OT prophet, Ezekiel, could see the new covenant coming and he wrote about what it would mean even more explicitly than Jeremiah. "'And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.'" (Ezk. 36:26-27 NLT)

What was wrong with the old way of relating to God? Why didn't it work? It's not because people couldn't understand it then or now. It's not because there's something wrong with our brains! No, it's because it failed to address the real problem. There's

something wrong with our hearts – that spiritual, emotional, psychological place inside of us that defines who we really are. Because of sin, our hearts start out being resistant, hard, and cold to God. The Bible says, “The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?” (Jer. 17:9 NLT) The old covenant tried to address the problem by getting us to obey God’s external standards without addressing the internal problem – our sinful hearts. It explained to us what living God’s way looked like, but it gave us no internal power to actually live that way. That’s why Paul wrote here, “The old way, with laws etched in stone, led to death.” (2 Cor. 3:7 NLT) But the new covenant – the new way of relating to God – goes right to the heart of the matter – the heart! Through the Holy Spirit, we are offered a new heart. That results in a new relationship with the God of the universe.

Dr. Christiann Barnard was the first surgeon to perform a heart transplant. He asked one of his patients, Philip Blaiberg, if he would like to see his old heart. Blaiberg said yes! So Dr. Barnard went up to a cupboard, took down a glass container and handed it to Blaiberg. Inside the container was his old heart. For a moment he stood there stunned because he was the first person in history ever to hold his own heart in his hands. He asked Dr. Barnard several questions. Then he turned, took one final look at the contents of that glass container, and said, “So, this is my old heart that caused me so much trouble.” He handed it back to Dr. Barnard, turned away, and left it forever. That’s a window into what Jesus does when you relate to God in the new way. Yes, you remain the same person, but God changes your heart spiritually and makes it new. If your life is truly cruciform – cross-shaped – it means the Holy Spirit has replaced your old, sick, sinful heart intent on living life it’s own destructive way with a new, healthy, clean heart intent on living life God’s abundant way. Fourth...

THE NEW WAY DEPENDS ON THE INDWELLING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

This might well be the most important difference between the old and new covenant. What God did through Jesus – the message Paul had been faithfully proclaiming – was a direct fulfillment of OT prophecy. “And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.” (Ezk. 36:27 NLT) The old way of relating to God lacked the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. The new way of relating to God absolutely depends on the Holy Spirit living His life through us. He changes our hearts, gives us a new love for God, fills us with faith, and provides a new internal spiritual power to live in a way that pleases God. Paul said here, “This is a covenant not of written laws, but of the Spirit. The old written covenant ends in death; but under the new covenant, the Spirit gives life.” (2 Cor. 3:6 NLT) Maybe the example of a fruit tree is one helpful way to explain the crucial difference here. Apples don’t grow on trees because Congress passed a law they should. Apples are the natural result – the fruit – of what apple trees do. A cruciform life – a life that’s shaped like the cross – isn’t just produced on demand. The OT Law couldn’t make it or force it to happen. That ended in condemnation and death. No, instead, it’s the natural and spiritual result when the Holy Spirit lives within your spirit. It results in salvation and life. Here’s a fifth reason the new way of relating to God is vastly superior to the old one.

THE NEW WAY HAS FAR BETTER RESULTS.

In what ways? Well, the new way makes me free. Paul wrote here, “For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” (2 Cor. 3:17 NLT) What’s meant by “freedom” there? It’s easy to forget that without the Holy Spirit living His life through you, you’re a spiritual slave. You’re in spiritual bondage to something more powerful than you. You’re enslaved to sin’s penalty which is eternal death and damnation. You’re enslaved to sin’s power. It will always dominate and rule your life. It’s impossible to have a healthy relationship with God, because sin is the tyrant that runs and ruins your life at every place. But when you’re born again by the Holy Spirit, what happens? Sin’s penalty is broken. God accepts Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross in your place and an eternal relationship with God is restored. Sin’s power is broken. Sure, you can still choose to do the wrong thing as a follower of Jesus. We often do! But now, for the first time you’re liberated to do the right thing. You’re freed up to consider others first, to love God and others sincerely, to receive and extend forgiveness, and to return good for evil. Sin stops being lord of your life and Jesus becomes the rightful Lord in its place.

Mark Reed was eating lunch at a small café. He saw a sparrow hop through the open door and peck at some crumbs near his table. When the crumbs were gone, the sparrow hopped to the window ledge, spread its wings, and took flight. Brief flight. It crashed against the windowpane and fell to the floor. The bird quickly recovered and tried again. Crash. And again. Crash. Mark got up and attempted to shoo the sparrow out the door, but the closer he got, the harder it threw itself against the pane. He nudged it with his hand. The sparrow fluttering along the ledge, hammering its beak at the glass. Finally, Mark reached out and gently caught the bird, folding his fingers around its wings and body. It weighed almost nothing. He thought of how powerless and vulnerable the sparrow must have felt at that moment. At the door he released it, and the sparrow sailed away. As Mark did with the sparrow, God takes us captive by His love and His grace only to set us free.

This new way of relating to God has far better results. The new way provides authentic transformation. Do you remember what the people of Israel did within a few days of Moses receiving the old covenant? They made an idol out of gold – a baby cow, a calf – fell down and worshiped it! Right out of the gate, they proved they were incapable of keeping the old way of relating to God. The old way can tell you and me what actions and attitudes please God – do this; don’t do that - but it gives us no ability to do what pleases Him or to quit doing what displeases Him. Put that reality beside the fact all of us have hearts that just naturally lean away from God, His will, and His ways and you have a deadly combination. That’s precisely why we needed – and will always need – the presence of the Holy Spirit if we’re going to relate to God in the new way He has provided. Paul wrote here, “And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.” (2 Cor. 3:18 NLT) Only the Holy Spirit living in you and me can produce authentic transformation.

We need to get clear on this whole business of spiritual transformation. Does God love you and me completely and fully? He's proved that by sending Jesus to us. But God's love doesn't mean He's content to leave us just the way we are when we first became Jesus' followers. Sometimes we followers of Jesus think all that matters is if we believe in who Jesus is and what He's done for us. And, yeah, we might join a church and try a little harder to be nicer person, too, as if that's all that matters to God. But if we have ever truly received God's grace by faith, we will make every effort to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in His mission to renew and transform our lives. The fact is we're called and expected to look more like Jesus increasingly. How does that happen? We develop a lifestyle that worships, serves, studies, prays, witnesses, and gives consistently. We join or lead a disciplinemaking triad. We take part in a ministry like re:generation. Transformation never happens accidentally. God expects us to be intentional about it.

The new way of relating to God has far better results. Let's conclude with the most obvious result of all. The new way successfully makes me right with god. That was Paul's argument in a nutshell here. Trying to be right with God by keeping the law results in condemnation. Why? Death – or eternal separation from God - is the penalty for sin. That's what's meant by condemnation. The old way defined sin for us so we couldn't offer the excuse we were ignorant or uninformed. But it didn't offer us any assistance to obey God's demands, either. It didn't somehow convince an absolutely holy God to grade our sin-dominated lives on a curve. Even a score of 99% obedience to God earns a failing grade. "If the old way, which brings condemnation..." (2 Cor. 3:9 NLT) But when we receive God's grace and we put our faith in who Jesus is and what Jesus did for us that's when the Holy Spirit comes to live in us. We're born again. The ultimate result is spiritual life. We're forgiven. We're justified – "just as if" - we never sinned at all in the sight of God. We're accepted. We're indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We're adopted as children into God's family. "How much more glorious is the new way, which makes us right with God!" (2 Cor. 3:9 NLT)

A cloud of doubt hangs over baseball home run king Barry Bonds. On August 7, 2007, Bonds hit number 756, the home run that broke Hank Aaron's record. Most of the talk about the record, however, is whether it really should count, because Bonds is alleged to have used steroids. Many baseball fans think his name should only go in the record book if it's accompanied by an asterisk. The asterisk means the record is tainted. The asterisk means there's big doubts whether the record is real. Mark Ecko bought the baseball that Bonds hit to set the record. He asked baseball fans what he should do with it. The fans told him to brand the baseball with an asterisk and donate it to the baseball Hall of Fame. In the summer of 2008 that's what Mark Ecko did.

Having an asterisk by your name and mine is actually something we all should be able to identify with. Scripture talks about the Book of Life, in which the names of each believer is recorded. With all the sins we've committed in this life, you would expect that each of us would have an asterisk by our name in that all-important Book. Tainted. Don't really belong. But so great is our justification in Jesus, so perfect is His work on the cross, so good, just, and right is God in accepting you, that there is not now and

there never will be an asterisk by your name in the Book of Life. Because of Jesus' work on the cross and the empty tomb, you truly belong in the Kingdom of God.

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? If so, you've stopped trying to relate to God the old way – through trying to be a good person and keeping all the rules. You've gladly accepted the new way of relating to Him. It's more wonderful and reflects God's glory better. It's permanent. It changes your heart because it allow the Holy Spirit to come into your life. And it has far better results. It sets you free. It means authentic transformation in your life. And, best of all, it successfully makes you right with God who you can now know Him as your Father in Heaven.