

Sermon: "The Transforming Spirit of God"

Text: II Corinthians 3:1-18.

Sermon Outline.

Introduction ~ Love letters – what do you do with them? What do you do with them after you've read them?

Last Sunday, May 17th, was Jim and Betty's 22nd Wedding Anniversary. Unfortunately, since Jim found himself in Jefferson Hospital, their special meal was hospital food. No matter, Betty brought something fit for the occasion. On each anniversary, Betty has given Jim a special anniversary card. Twenty-two of them now. Last Sunday, Betty brought all twenty-two cards to the hospital so they could both enjoy them all over again... Anniversary cards as love letters.

Some college choirs do spring tours. We've had Kenyon College Choir and the Choir from West Point here. In the days before the concert date, the letters begin arriving in the mail. These letters are distributed usually at the meal for the choir right after the worship service.

Choir members will come up to you as the pastor and ask you if any letters arrived for choir members during the week. Each choir member has that hopeful glint in their eyes.

Even with cell phones and texting, love letters still have their place because you can hang on to them. You can't do that so well with a text message.

It's an obvious question, but it need to be asked: "Which is more important: the love letter(s) or the person who wrote the love letters. I just have to believe a person has to be more significant than a piece of paper. And you agree with me, don't you?"

Friends, this basic/simple insight applies to our relationship with Jesus Christ.

■ The Christian faith is not a religion; it's a relationship with a Person.

As important as the Bible is, the Christian faith is not a set of special rules from the pages of a special Book. The Christian faith is a relationship with a Person... a unique Person, Who is alive from the dead... a unique Person Who gives His Spirit to those who believe in Him. This morning, we're going to take a look at the difference between dead religion and a life-giving, life-transforming relationship.

Sermon: "The Transforming Spirit of God"

Text: II Corinthians 3:1-18.

Sermon Outline.

It's the differences between the pages of a love letter and a real Person. In our text, the Apostle Paul says this: "For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

Paul wrote II Corinthians to the Church in Corinth, a church Paul founded on his Second Missionary Journey. Luke tells us the story in Acts, Chapter Eighteen. A major seaport, Corinth was located on a narrow strip of land that separates Greece from Macedonia. There was a significant Jewish community in Corinth.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he preached Jesus in the Jewish synagogue there. Incidentally, archeologists have discovered the actual doorpost inscription of that synagogue, which says, "Synagogue of the Hebrews." Paul preached Jesus alive from the dead in that synagogue... until they kicked Paul out.

Those who believed in Jesus Messiah moved into a large house right next door to the synagogue, the house of Titius Justus. Crispus, the president of the synagogue, and his entire household came to faith in Messiah Jesus. The church in Corinth met in a private house right next door to the synagogue. This is important background in understanding our text because here's what happens in Corinth right after Paul moves on to preach the Good news elsewhere.

Soon afterward, some Jewish teachers arrive from Israel and begin to tell these new believers in Jesus that Paul had got the story all wrong. They told those people, 'You cannot be saved unless you live by and keep the whole Law of Moses.' 'Just add your faith in Jesus onto being a Jew; the Law of Moses – that's the main thing. You don't have to become anything different than what you already are.'

Now, it's not so easy to handle something that's radically new. For example, you cannot simply add Einstein's Theory of Relativity onto the physics of Sir Isaac Newton. Sometimes, the radically new displaces the old.

But in every group of people, there will always be some who will simply want to patch the new onto the fabric of the old. Paul says, 'God has given us a completely new bolt of fabric; the new covenant in Jesus is radically new – you can't patch it onto the old.' It's an immediate, personal relationship with the living God.

Sermon: "The Transforming Spirit of God"

Text: II Corinthians 3:1-18.

Sermon Outline.

So what's the difference between dead religion and a personal relationship? A personal relationship with Jesus is radically different from dead religion. Not a dead religion, a personal relationship – how can you tell the difference?

None of us wants to waste our time, our efforts, our lives pursuing a dead end that cannot satisfy in the end or along the way. You and I desperately need and want a personal relationship with the living God. How can we move out of a dead religious experience and into a personal relationship?

✧ In the Christian faith, there are three radically new elements that can enable you to move out of dead religion and into the reality of a personal relationship

I. The first radically new element that can enable you to come alive and leave dead religion behind is direct, personal access to the living God. Jesus will engage you in a direct, personal relationship, if you come to Him, if you seek Him, not casually, but with all your heart.

In verses seven through eighteen of our text, Paul gives a free interpretation (a Midrash) of a specific passage of the Old Testament: Exodus 34:29-34. Those Jewish Believers in Corinth would be very familiar with this Old Testament text. As this letter is read out loud in a worship service, they would immediately pick up on what Paul is doing with this Exodus story.

It's the story in Exodus of Moses talking directly with God. Moses had direct access to God, but the people of Israel did not. Moses wore a veil so that the people of Israel would not see that the glory of God on Moses' face was fading out. When Moses went back into the Tent of Meeting to talk with God, Moses would remove that veil and talk with God face to face.

Paul picks out three specifics in the text for comment:

1. First, the glory. The glory authenticates Moses as a servant of God. Paul says, 'Check it out in the text; the glory faded out.'
2. Second, the veil. The veil hides the fact of fading glory. The veil covers the minds of people with dead religion. The veil covers their hearts. That veil of death – (remember the veil

Sermon: "The Transforming Spirit of God"

Text: II Corinthians 3:1-18.

Sermon Outline.

Jackie Kennedy wore during the President's funeral?) is removed only when a person turns to Jesus.

3. Third, "the Lord," in that Exodus text is the Holy Spirit. When a person turns to the Spirit of God, they are transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is boldness, freedom – direct, immediate, intimate personal contact with God. There is increasing warmth of a glory that radiates on contact with God.

There is such a difference between holding some love-letters in your hands and holding a real, live human being who loves you... Some people might sleep with those love letters under their pillow, or even a photograph; but that can only be a poor substitute for the real person.

The older theologians of the church talk about the 'instrumentality of the Bible.' The Bible is not an end in itself; it's a means, an instrument, to a larger end, a love relationship with the living God.

In John's Gospel, Jesus says to the Pharisees: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me to have life." [John 5:39-40]

God gave us the Bible to bring us into a personal relationship with His Son, Jesus Christ. Only the Son can give you life by the power of His Holy Spirit. The letter leaves you still dead; only the Spirit gives life. In other words, dead religion never gets beyond the pages of a love letter into a relationship with a real Person.

If your religious experience is dead, perhaps you need to try the real thing... You go into the Book to get beyond the Book to a Real Person. You can experience this direct access to a Real Person only through Jesus. You can experience this direct access only through effective praying.

II. The second radically new element in the Christian faith is the power, the life-giving power, of the Holy Spirit.

The pages of the Bible cannot supply life-giving power, though they can tell you Who to get it from. In Galatians, Paul says this about the letter, the written Law of God: "If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come through the

Sermon: "The Transforming Spirit of God"

Text: II Corinthians 3:1-18.

Sermon Outline.

Law. But the Scriptures declare that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe." [Galatians 3:21-22]

I believe in the verbal inspiration and authority of the Bible. I affirm that Bible to be inspired by a special work of the Holy Spirit of God. But, friends, there are some things the Bible cannot do for you. For example,

- The Bible can tell you the plan of salvation, God's way of saving a person; but only you can choose to invite Jesus into your life. The Bible can't do that for you...
- The Bible can tell you about the Holy Spirit of God; but the Bible cannot give the Holy Spirit of God to you. The Bible points you to the Person Who can. The Bible says only Jesus can give His Holy Spirit to you.

A major difference between dead religion and a personal relationship is the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us that the work of the Holy Spirit is now permanent. You and I were meant to experience the Holy Spirit of God not only today, but throughout eternity. Or would you still duck the effort to discover and use your spiritual gifts when they are but a foretaste of what you as a believer will be doing throughout eternity in the new creation of God? The writer of Hebrews refers to your spiritual gifts as "the powers of the age to come..."

Take the Holy Spirit out of the Christian faith and all you have left is dead religion. If you find your religious experience is dead or fading out, obviously, you need the power of the Holy Spirit in your life. The New Testament knows only One God – the God Who raised Jesus from the dead. God did that, raised Jesus from the dead, by the power of the Holy Spirit. I say again, if your experience of Jesus is dead, you need the power of the Holy Spirit in your life. The Holy Spirit – He's the difference between dead religion and a personal relationship. He's also the difference between American Christianity and the authentic Christian faith of the Apostles.

III. The third radically new element in the Christian faith is personal change and transformation caused by the Holy Spirit in a person's life.

Sermon: "The Transforming Spirit of God"

Text: II Corinthians 3:1-18.

Sermon Outline.

Personal growth and change – that's a key distinguishing factor between dead religion and living faith, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Dead religion is religion without any personal change. When Jesus called the disciples, the fishermen in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus said, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." Our Pew Bible omits a key word from the Greek text; "genesthai," the word "become."

You see, dead religion is for the complacent, the self-satisfied, the 'I'm already good enough I don't need to change' kind of person. The Christian faith is radically different from that. It's a personal relationship that's built around the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Joyfully, authentic faith cries out, "Lord, change me!"

Conclusion ~ There are three new elements in the Christian faith that mark the difference between dead religion and a personal relationship:

1. Direct access to Jesus alive from the dead. A personal access that's marked by boldness and freedom.
2. The life-giving power of the Holy Spirit; and
3. The radical, on-going change the Holy Spirit makes in a person's life.

These three elements mark the difference between dead religion and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

The question is: where are you this morning? Dead religion only keeps a person dead. A personal relationship with Jesus gives a person eternal life today and gets a person into heaven tomorrow.

You may say, "I go to church almost every Sunday and volunteer whenever they need a hand." Billy Sunday, the baseball player turned evangelist said this: "Being in church doesn't make you a Christian any more than being in a garage makes you a car."

"Well, I'm a good person. I don't break the law or willfully hurt anybody." How good is good enough? Whose standards do you measure yourself by? No matter how good your standards are, admit it – you don't always meet your own standards; and it's God's

Sermon: "The Transforming Spirit of God"

Text: II Corinthians 3:1-18.

Sermon Outline.

standards that count... Salvation is not about good works; it's about a personal relationship.

"Oh, I know. I prayed a prayer once when I was young."

Understand me very carefully this moment. I've had the high privilege of assisting other people as they invited Jesus Christ to come into their life through prayer. No one is saved simply by praying a little prayer.

A person is saved through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Prayer can be the beginning of that beautiful life-giving relationship. It's something like being introduced to your future spouse; it's the first step toward a whole life-time.

Isn't it time for you to move out of dead religion and into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? Isn't it time you allowed God the freedom to change you into the person He always intended you to be?