

I had this professor in college - we'll call him Dr. B. - who was famous for being pretty eccentric. He played favorites with students, and the students in his inner circle knew he wrote amazing letters of recommendation for grad school. Dr. B. was in the psychology department, so I only had one class with him, but one of my best friends had Dr. B. as his advisor and was most definitely in the "inner circle". And when I started the application process to grad school, my buddy pulled me aside and told me I was on Dr. B's short list of favorite students (I have no idea why - I didn't ask too many questions).

So I worked up the courage to ask Dr. B for a letter of recommendation. He graciously agreed and told me to come back the next day. I did so, and Dr. B. handed me an unsealed envelope (letters of recommendation are held in strict confidence). He told me to read it and, if I liked it, send it in.

I read it. And it was *amazing*. Easily the best recommendation I'd ever received. Glowing doesn't even come close to doing it justice.

It also wasn't true.

Dr. B. had written me a letter that didn't reflect me very accurately at all. It was like a super-scholarly version of me. I don't know what I expected - Dr. B. barely knew me, after all - but this letter was incredible.

Of course I sent it in!

But I never forgot how that letter of recommendation made me feel - a little bit bad. Because I wasn't even close to the guy the letter described. It made me sound awfully nice, but if anyone in the interview process had actually gotten to know me, I knew they'd be sorely disappointed. **[Real me vs. Fake me]** Because the person Mr. B. described in that letter didn't exist. He was a false image. I knew there was a pretty big gap between the person in that letter and the reality I saw in the mirror.

A lot of us know that feeling. Maybe you feel it in your job, where you're less competent than you're supposed to be. Or as a parent, where you feel like a fraud at every step in your kid's development. Maybe it's as a friend, partner or spouse - you never seem to be able to *do* enough to be perfect. We feel it a *lot* in the Church. That's in part because we have this narrative of what life with Jesus looks like. We don't mean to (usually), but Christians often communicate that people who don't know Jesus are bad and people who know Jesus are not just good, but perfect. (That's not true of course - there are *lots* of great people who don't follow Jesus, and plenty of rotten folks who do).

[Seeing Myself in the Mirror] So when you encounter God, when you hear the Spirit calling you into Jesus' story and you respond, you end up thinking you have to be perfect. And we're not, so we fake it. We build a spiritual facade, trying hard to fake perfection, hiding away all that "negative" stuff like grief and struggle because we want to be perceived as spiritual, as holy.

And you end up feeling fake, like Church is less about being yourself than it is being some impossible, idealized version of yourself. No one likes that feeling.

If you're a person who knows the pain of living with a gap between your facade and the real you, I have some good news for you: being perfect is not what a life with Jesus is all about. What matters, what is actually good news to the world around us is *not* that we are perfect, but that we are *being made perfect*. We are being transformed from death into life and the process of transformation is the good news.

The you in the mirror, the *real* you, is the you the world needs to see.

[Week 2 Graphic] Presenting a perfect face to the world isn't good news because it says, "If you are willing to try hard enough, you can have a life with God." It reinforces that divide we perceive between the secular and the sacred. We see God as distant, removed, up there, spiritual. And we see ourselves and our world as ordinary, boring and unspiritual. This is why we create facades, because we live down here, and the goal is up there. So we fake it.

[Week 2 Graphic 2] This is the final week of Epiphany, the season of the Church year that celebrates how God is revealed to the world. Epiphany reminds us that God came to the whole world, to everyone everywhere, not just a few chosen elites. God destroyed the sacred/secular divide by becoming one of us.

This year, our Epiphany series has been FEAR and DESIRE. We've been asking what God's coming means for us, for our callings. Again and again, we've seen the beautiful and scary truth that *everyone* is called, not just a few ultra spiritual people who are a couple of rungs above the rest of us. Today we might say God doesn't just call perfect people. God calls everyone to *become* perfect. And being honest about that transformation is the best news you could tell anyone.

[Scripture Slide] For the last several weeks, we've been in the letter we call 1 Corinthians, which Paul wrote in response to several questions the Corinthian Christians had. Today, we're going to look at 2 Corinthians, specifically chapter 3. Go ahead and turn there with me.

Paul wrote this letter quite a while after he wrote 1 Corinthians - it could have been several years. In the time between these letters, a group of apostles has come to Corinth bearing letters of recommendation. In a world where you couldn't Google someone's credentials, letters of recommendation were how you knew who to trust. These apostles are apparently *very* impressive by Corinthian standards - most scholars think they were trained in the best rhetoric of the day.

And most importantly, these new apostles disagreed with Paul. Again, we're not sure exactly how, but whatever their doctrinal disagreement, many of the Corinthians are beginning to side with these new apostles. Some have even apparently suggested Paul himself might need to

bring back a letter of recommendation. Much of the opening of 2 Corinthians is Paul defending his apostleship.

Before we read what Paul is doing here, we need to be clear how he's developing his argument, because it's a bit complicated.

Paul is angry because what captivates the Corinthians about these new apostles is their way with words, their trained rhetoric. They show up with letters, and what gives their letter umph is their rhetorical skill. Essentially, they're educated, and their education put them on a pedestal in the Corinthian Christians' eyes. Paul is (relative to these new apostles) uneducated. He doesn't have any formal rhetorical training. He's more Hebrew than Greek.

Paul isn't concerned just because they are choosing someone else over him. (Obviously that hurts personally, but that's not why he's angry.) For Paul, the Corinthians have a real problem that has been plaguing them for years - they're falling back into evaluating people according to the criteria of the world rather than by the ways of the kingdom of God. (If you've been here the last few weeks, you know this is a problem the Corinthians struggled with again and again - they couldn't grasp the upside-down nature of God's new way.)

Greek culture values people for the facades they build - for how well they can make arguments. It's style over substance. But God's kingdom values ordinary people because God, their king, chooses to use ordinary people. God's way is the way of kings born not in palaces but in manglers. Of victory not by conquering but by dying on a cross.

To drive this point home, Paul returns in the beginning of chapter 3 to this issue of letters of recommendation. Let's read Paul's words"

Are we beginning to praise ourselves again? Are we like others, who need to bring you letters of recommendation, or who ask you to write such letters on their behalf? Surely not! The only letter of recommendation we need is you yourselves. Your lives are a letter written in our hearts; everyone can read it and recognize our good work among you. Clearly, you are a letter from Christ showing the result of our ministry among you. This "letter" is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts. We are confident of all this because of our great trust in God through Christ. It is not that we think we are qualified to do anything on our own. Our qualification comes from God. He has enabled us to be ministers of his new covenant. 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 Corinthians 3:1-6

You are my letter of recommendation. You, the Church of Corinth. The people I lived among, working with what skill I had, *you* are the proof that I represent God. Because you encountered the living God through me, through my work! If you accept the way these new apostles are teaching, you're invalidating your own faith!

[Picture: Mountain with people at the bottom and “glory” at the top] In this passage, Paul references his own religion, Judaism. Paul’s Jewish faith centered on Moses, who received a covenant on stone tablets (10 Commandments!). God descended to the top of a mountain, and Moses went up to talk to God.

That’s not terribly different from the Greek pagan faiths, where the gods live on top of mountains (like Mt. Olympus) and only those super-spiritual people can access them.

And it’s not terribly different from how we see the world - that God is “up there” and we’re down here and only the super-spiritual people can access God.

In other words, we don’t see ourselves like Moses. We’re not the people who climb the mountain to see God. We’re the people who wait on the ground.

Paul is about to dismantle our way of thinking. He’s about to prove that if we think that way - that we’re unspiritual and God is up there not down here, then we’re falling back into the patterns of old faiths that can’t save us. That in fact, when we think that way, we’re returning to the very things we were saved *from*.

To make his argument, Paul uses a strange fact about Moses - anytime he met with God, Moses’ face would glow with God’s glory. It was like he’d been too close to a nuclear reactor. Moses’ glowing face freaked the Israelites out, so Moses wore a veil to hide the glory from Israel.

If that sounds a little strange to you, think about how uncomfortable you feel around super-religious people, people who seem like those high up, closer to God people. They’re a little strange, right? For people who live on the ground, a God who doesn’t stay on the mountain is threatening. Scary. Paul assures us God is up to something better. Skip down to verse 12:

Since this new way gives us such confidence, we can be very bold. We are not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so the people of Israel would not see the glory, even though it was destined to fade away. But the people’s minds were hardened, and to this day whenever the old covenant is being read, the same veil covers their minds so they cannot understand the truth. And this veil can be removed only by believing in Christ. Yes, even today when they read Moses’ writings, their hearts are covered with that veil, and they do not understand.

But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.

Therefore, since God in his mercy has given us this new way, we never give up. We reject all shameful deeds and underhanded methods. We don’t try to trick anyone or distort the word of God. We tell the truth before God, and all who are honest know this. -- 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

We should pause before we move forward because this is one of those problem texts in the Bible -- this text sounds on the surface like it's anti-Semitic. This is one of the texts Christians have used for centuries to justify persecuting the Jewish people. We never should have done that - Paul himself *is* Jewish. Paul isn't saying Christians are good and Jews are bad. His focus is on the religion the Corinthians value, the bright, shiny, impressive religion that lives on the tops of mountains and on pedestals. For Paul, that kind of religion is worthless.

Under the old system, the mountain-top religions, the special spiritual few brought God's glory down to the rest of us. And it *didn't work*. Greek, Jewish, whatever. No matter how great the old mountain-top systems are, they can't transform the raw material of a sinful humanity.

Paul says what we need is a religion that comes down off the mountain, a religion that doesn't just reveal glory to a broken humanity, but transforms us all into glory. Religion on a pedestal doesn't work. It never has and it never will. That's why these new apostles in Corinth are *bad news* for the Corinthians. It's *good* that Paul's not a fancy speaker, that he's not impressive by Corinthian standards because if God can work through him, it means God can work through *all the Corinthians* too.

There are two groups of people for Paul: the old humanity, those living in the old mountain top religion, and the new humanity, those who have encountered the God who came down from the mountain to live among us. Jesus makes humanity new, transforms us from the inside out and gives us abilities that enable us to build God's kingdom.

The good news is that God transforms us and enables us to participate in Jesus' new life. Our job is to live out this good news in front of the people in our lives. The good news is not "God uses great people". You don't show that by faking it. You show that by living authentically in front of the people around you. So they can see the good and the bad. The successes and the failures. The world around us needs to be able to see that we're being transformed from death to life. *Transformation* is the good news.

Friends living this out is hard. Coming down off the mountain, choosing a faith that's not about pedestals but real transformation goes against our nature.

[\[Tommy's Video\]](#)

[Image] In Christ, God is transforming us from that glory to a new glory, the glory at the foot of the mountain, the glory where every single person reflects the image of God. Rather than one person among us shining like the sun, *we all shine with God's glory*. Paul says when we live like this, honest and open about how God is making us new, we reflect God's life into the world. We're like a mirror reflecting God's light into the world.

As Paul says, "So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image."

Friends, I want to invite you into an authentic faith, one that's not pretending. For the last month, we've seen that God calls us in the real world, that our faith has skin on it. We don't have to pretend to be other-worldly super-Christians who have no struggles, who don't have a real life. That's not what faith is all about.

[How do we illustrate these last two paragraphs?] When we choose to be authentically who God has called us to be, when we allow the world to see how we are being transformed, we are glorious. God is revealed not in our strengths, but in our weaknesses. God is revealed not in pretending we never fall, but in telling the story of how we get back up and keep going. God is revealed not in our perfection, but in our transformation.

We are not good news when we are perfect. We are good news when we reflect who we are to the world, warts and all. So will you live a real faith? Will you let the world around you see that Catalyst is not a church for people on pedestals? Will you show our city that we're real people with real problems who are really being transformed?

Communion SetUp

[Communion Slide] We can't do this without God. Again and again in this series, we've seen that the Spirit is the one who makes us new, that in the Spirit is where we find freedom. So today we begin our journey at the communion table. This table points us back to the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed. At that meal, he broke bread as his body, broken for us. He offered us wine as his blood, poured out as a new covenant. This meal invites us off the mountain and onto the ground, just as God left heaven to live among us. This meal invites us into the broken body of God. We participate in communion as a people who are broken, a people who needs the grace God offers us.

You may have noticed mirrors in the back as you came in. Because today we are celebrating that God's transformation is the good news, because Paul promises when we live a real faith on the ground, we reflect God's glory, I want to invite you into an exercise with me.

By the mirrors are some dry erase markers. After you have received communion, as you return to your seats, write something on the mirror - some area of your life where God is transforming you. Something you thought you had to keep hidden to be a real follower of Jesus.

Let this exercise remind you that our *transformation* is the good news, not our perfection. May you be encouraged to live a genuine faith as you leave, knowing that God gives you grace by the Spirit to do so.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion. If you're willing to live an authentic faith, to allow God to transform you and to be honest and open about that transformation, then you're welcome to come to God's table.

Blessing

[Thomas Merton + Quote] “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.” -- Tomas Merton