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It's About Time God Straightened Up 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

Merry Christmas everyone. I hope you had a wonderful day yesterday. We did, but we were all aware that it wasn't the same without Granddad around. I appreciate so much the incredible outpouring of encouragement, prayer and support that you, our church, have offered to our family during this difficult time. We are so grateful to be a part of what God is doing here.

Christmas day can sometimes be a bit stressful for us because my beautiful bride, Diane, thrives in the midst of order rather than chaos. There's nothing wrong with that per se, but here's the issue: we have three children between 4 and 8 years old. So, on Christmas, when wrapping paper is flying all over the family room, the breakfast dishes are unevenly distributed around the house, and little pieces of toys are ending up in the most random of places, I'll look over at Diane with her beautiful smile ... and I just know on the inside she's thinking, "find a happy place, find a happy place!"

Does anyone else ever feel like that in the midst of the chaos of Christmas? Do you have a desire to get everything straightened up in your house or in your life? How about in your world?

During this Christmas season we've been preaching a sermon series called *It's About Time*. Time was an important element of the first Christmas as Mark reminded us on Friday night. Paul writes in Galatians 4:4, "**When the time had fully come, God sent his Son.**" At the time that was set by God before time even began, the Messiah came. Jesus lived among us; he showed us who God is and how to live God's way in God's world. And then he died in our place and then on the third day he rose in victory. Forty days later he was taken up to Heaven with the promise that someday he'd return to culminate God's story on earth.

But, what about this time? What about now? The heavenly host promised peace on earth to men at the birth of the Messiah, but we all know that our world is a pretty messed up place. So, what is God up to? Is He up in Heaven closing His eyes and just hoping that when he opens them the mess will magically be cleaned up. Is He thinking, "find a happy place, find a happy place"? Since God is certainly capable, don't you think it's about time God straightened things up around here? Shouldn't He be taking away all the wars and taking out all the evil people?

This morning our Scripture text will remind us that God is actively at work; He is straightening things up. And it starts with you.

2 Corinthians 3:12-18

¹² Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. ¹³ We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. ¹⁴ But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵ Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. ¹⁶ But whenever anyone 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 freedom. ¹⁸ And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect^[a] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

This is one of those passages that you might have to read a few times to wrap your brain around what is happening, so keep your bibles open. Much of the book of 2 Corinthians is a defense a Paul's own ministry. There were some folks who had begun to question whether the church should listen to Paul, and 2 Corinthians is Paul's response. In this section Paul is comparing his ministry to Moses' ministry in hopes that it helps to legitimize his authority in the Corinthian church. But there are some remarkable things in this passage that are extremely important for us to understand this morning. So, let's ask the Holy Spirit to help us.

Prayer of Illumination

To understand this passage we need to remember a scene in the Old Testament. It's in Exodus 34. Moses had been meeting with God on Mount Sinai. Do you remember what happened to him when he came down? Scripture says "*his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.*" In fact it was so radiant that all his buddies were afraid to even come near him. So, Moses covered his face with a veil. Then whenever he went in the holy place to speak to the Lord he would remove the veil and keep it off until he told the people what God had spoken.

But Paul reminds us that the radiance on Moses' face would eventually begin to fade - just like the way our summer tans slowly fade back into pasty white. The radiance would fade because the Law of Moses wasn't the full meal deal - it was never intended to be permanent; even though the Law was God's loving gift, it couldn't save us; it couldn't do what God wanted done for us and for the world. The law was just a foretaste of what we experienced in Jesus. Jesus fulfilled the Law; he did everything God's law could possibly do, and more; he did everything God wanted done. That's why the old covenant has been replaced. In Christ, we have a new covenant. It's a covenant of grace because of what Jesus did on the cross. And Paul proclaims that the glory of this new covenant will not fade.

That's the hope of which Paul speaks in verse 12. And the next few verses remind us that if we're looking only to the Old Testament law we're still not seeing the reality of God's glory in what Jesus Christ has done.

I think the Message translation of this passage helps to make it a bit clearer. Listen to the way it paraphrases this section: *With that kind of hope to excite us, nothing holds us back. Unlike Moses, we have nothing to hide. Everything is out in the open with us. He wore a veil so the children of Israel wouldn't notice that the glory was fading away—and they didn't notice. They didn't notice it then and they don't notice it now, don't notice that there's nothing left behind that veil. Even today when the proclamations of that old, bankrupt government are read out, they can't see through it. Only Christ can get rid of the veil so they can see for themselves that there's nothing there.*

But when we turn to the Lord, the veil is taken away; In Christ the veil is removed. The Message goes on, *"Whenever, though, they turn to face God as Moses did, God removes the veil and there they are—face-to-face! They suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone. And when God is personally present, a living Spirit, that old, constricting legislation is recognized as obsolete. We're free of it! All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him."*

Are you catching it? Paul is saying something pretty remarkable here. Because of what Christ has done, now we who know Christ are reflecting God's glory ... just like Moses. Turn to the person next to you; are they shiny? Not because of their trip to the tanning bed, but are they shiny because of what Christ has done in their lives? Look back at verse 18 in your bibles. There's something that we experience that Moses didn't. Read it with me, *"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."*

Who reflects the glory? **We all reflect the Lord's glory.** Paul isn't saying that only he, as the great apostle, is the one reflecting God's glory. Rather, everyone who turns to Christ, is reflecting God's glory. So what was once only experienced by Moses is now to be experienced by everyone who follows Christ. But Moses' radiance was an external reality that faded. Of course it must have impacted him as a person, but what people saw was his face glowing. Here, Paul speaks of something much deeper than a glowing tan; he speaks about being transformed. **To be transformed means to be changed in the very essence of your person; it's a metamorphosis.** And the verb form here is passive, so someone else is the cause of the transformation that's happening in us. So, who is causing the transformation? Yes! God is at work in the life of every believer; He is transforming you! He is transforming you *"into His likeness"*; in other words, God is at work in you to make you think and talk and live more like Jesus. So what happens with the glory? Does it fade like Moses' face? No! As God transforms you, His glory reflected in you doesn't

fade, it actually increases! The original language says that it grows from glory to glory – from ‘one degree of glory to the next’ another version says.

Beloved, here is the incredible and profound truth of what this says: God is at work in you to totally change you to be more and more like Jesus. As He does that work in you His glory doesn’t fade; it increases.

So, what is God up to these days? God is straightening things up ... in you. How? Well, God is convicting you about things that need to change in your life. God is surrounding you with Christian community to help you grow. God is revealing the truth to you in scripture. God is allowing you to experience Him so that you might know Him more. God is training you to be mission minded. God is stirring you to care for the world like He does. God is providing opportunities for you to participate in His work in your family and in your neighborhood and in your workplace. God is at work in you. He’s transforming you ... right now ... God, the Creator, is working in you ... to make you more like Jesus. He loves you just the way you are, but He loves you way too much to let you stay that way.

Does anyone know what this process of God straightening you up or transforming you into His likeness is called? It’s called **sanctification**. Sanctification is the process of growing in our relationship with Christ or becoming more Christ-like or learning to live in holiness. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul stresses how God is the one causing this process, but if God is the One doing it, do WE have anything to do with it? Yes. Flip over to 2 Corinthians 7:1. Paul writes, “**let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.**” In his letter to the Philippians Paul writes, “**continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling**” (Phil 2:12b). We participate with our effort, but without the effort of God, sanctification would never happen in us.

The problem is that instead of participating we often resist God’s work in us. We can refuse to participate. We resist by intentionally choosing to continue in particular sins – either because we can’t stop or we like them too much to stop. We resist by avoiding God’s community – keeping other Christians at arm’s length so that they don’t really know us and can’t really help us. Many of us resist by just being apathetic as if what God wants to do in us doesn’t really matter. God is at work in you, but because of our sin we have a tendency to try to avoid that work. Are you avoiding the work that God is trying to do in you?

What we NEED to do is align ourselves with God’s work in our lives. We do that by getting help with a group like Celebrate Recovery for those habitual sins or moving towards Christian community by getting into a LifeGroup that is actually working together to grow in Christ or by setting time aside everyday to reflect on God’s Word or by finding a place to serve others for Christ’s sake. Those are the kind of things that line you up with what God wants to do in you.

So, what is it that God is doing in you? Can you think of a specific way that God has changed you this year. How have you become more like Jesus?

When I think about what God has done in me in this year I am most aware of these past few months. God is at work in me right now making me a better son-in-law to Diane's mom. After Dad's death, my relationship with Mom has changed. My love for her is deepening; my readiness to serve her is increasing; my communication with her is improving. I'm thankful to God for that, and I believe it is a work of His Spirit in me.

What is God doing in you? Are you resisting Him? Are you apathetic about it? Don't you think it's about time to let God straighten things up in you? Don't you think it's about time to let God have His way with you? What is it that God is revealing to you this morning that He wants you to do?

Often when we think about our own relationship with Christ we think it about in a very selfish way. Your sanctification or your reflection of Christ is about way more than just you being a better Christian. The stakes are incredibly high for aligning myself up with what God is doing in me. The health of my marriage depends on it. The well-being of my family ... of my kids depends on it. Parents, your kids are counting on you to grow in your relationship with Christ. Husbands, your wives are counting on you to stop being passive about Jesus. Your LifeGroup is counting on you to help them grow in their relationship with Christ. And if you're a member of this church, we're all counting on you to grow in God's glory. The implications of your sanctification, or your growth in Christ, are HUGE. If God is going to straighten things up in your family or in your neighborhood or in your city or in your world, your increasingly glorious reflection of Christ in those places matters most of all.

God IS at work in you to transform you more and more, with ever-increasing glory, into the likeness of His Son. It's part of His plan to straighten things up in your life and in your family and in your world. So may you align yourself with what God is already doing in you by surrendering yourself to His will so that you might participate in His Kingdom coming and His will being done.

Amen.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read** the passage out loud.
- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.
- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **Pray together:** tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **Dig deeper**
 1. How have you grown in God's glory in 2010? Write down some specific ways that Christ has changed you. If you're struggling to find answers ask God to help you understand why.
 2. What specifically might be keeping you from participating fully in the work of the Spirit in you?