JM Jason Mayfield

SERMON OUTLINE FOR PASTORS

THE MINISTRY OF DEATH

The Law of Moses Has Ended, and the Ministry of the Spirit Has Come

> The law is a ministry of death and condemnation, designed to bring us to the end of ourselves. In Jesus we receive the ministry of the Spirit and of righteousness, and as we behold His glory as in a mirror, our beholding is impacting our becoming.

MAIN TEXT
2 Corinthians 3:4-18

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SERIES
Our Father, Week 2 of 4

BY
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AT A GLANCE

THE MESSAGE

1. The Law of Moses is a composite whole. It cannot be split into moral, civil and ceremonial sections, because all of it flows from the Ten Commandments and nothing carved in letters on stone is civil or ceremonial.
2. The law arouses sinful passions rather than restraining them. Israel proved it at Sinai, breaking the first commandment before Moses got down the mountain.
3. Scripture calls the law a ministry, the ministry of death and of condemnation. It carries real glory, but a fading one, and it was designed to bring a person to the end of himself so he looks to one who is capable.
4. Jesus holds the other ministry, the ministry of the Spirit and of righteousness. Every time the law or its derivative, legalism, is preached, the veil comes back over a person; when one turns to the Lord the veil is removed.
5. Gospel preachers are entrusted with a third ministry, reconciliation. The job is to help people reconcile what they owe the law against what has been provided at the cross, not to preach them into feeling less than.
6. Beholding the glory of the Lord happens as in a mirror. Everything needed has been sufficiently imputed by Jesus Christ, so what looks back is the righteousness of God in Christ, and the beholding is what is producing the becoming.



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READ THE ARTICLE

jasonmayfield.com/messages/the-ministry-of-death

PREACHING NOTES

Before You Preach

This is the second message in the Our Father series, and it picks up exactly where week 1 stopped: Romans 5:20 and the law. Week 1 dealt with Adam and Jesus, sin and grace, which nearly every evangelical agrees on. This week moves to where the tension lives: what grace is for after you are saved. Expect some pushback, and ask people to lean in.

The message moves from Romans (the law arouses sin) to 2 Corinthians 3 (two ministries). Keep the passages on the screen. The key teaching moment is that the Law of Moses is a composite whole: people cannot keep the "moral" part and set the rest aside, because the part carved in stone is the Ten Commandments.

Introduction

> **MATTHEW 6:9-13** ESV
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> [9] Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. [10] Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. [11] Give us this day our daily bread, [12] and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. [13] And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Say the Lord's Prayer together. We pray it every week so the template gets into your mind and becomes a jumping-off point for talking to the Lord through the day.

Recap of last week (Romans 5). Your revelation of the grace of God determines how much you see that grace manifest in your life.

- **The spiritual manifestation of grace is done.** When you put your faith in Jesus, your name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Signed, sealed, delivered.
- **The physical manifestation is governed by your understanding of grace.** Not the more you pray, serve or give. Those things matter only when they are powered by the finished work of Jesus.

Last week was basic teaching on justification. Everybody in the evangelical world agrees you are a sinner, and you are saved by grace through faith, not by works. The tension around grace is not the moment you get saved. **It is what happens next.**

As soon as you get saved, the enemy starts to reinforce the idea that your behavior not only saves you but keeps you. He wants you to keep trying to earn everything from the Lord, and to feel that every time you mess up, you have fallen out of favor. That has a name: **condemnation.** If the enemy can get you

feeling condemned and disqualified, you will give up and run from the Lord, not because you want to sin, but because you have realized you can't be good enough.

So what is grace for after you are saved? Most preachers would say grace empowers you to live right. That is true to a degree, but those are fringe benefits of grace. **If you focus on the fringe benefits of grace, you will not get the breakthrough of grace.**

Paul said, "I do not nullify the grace of God" (Galatians 2:21). Today is about the beautiful, reckless grace of God, the grace that took Jesus to the cross for people we may not even like.

1. The Law Arouses Sin

Last week Romans 5 introduced Adam and Jesus, and then a third person: "death reigned from Adam to Moses" (Romans 5:14). Moses stands for the law.

> **ROMANS 5:20** ESV
>
> [20] Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,

Some will say, "That's the only place it says that. Read it in context." So here are a few more from Romans:

> **ROMANS 3:21** ESV
>
> [21] But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—

The Law and the Prophets still have value. They bear witness. But we are no longer made righteous by the law.

> **ROMANS 7:5** ESV
>
> [5] For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.

Our sinful passions were "aroused by the law." The law did not make them better. It made them worse. You heard "thou shalt not," and something in you wanted to.

Illustration: Sinai. It took no time at all.

- God spoke the commandments to Israel, beginning with "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3).
- The people were so afraid that they told Moses, "do not let God speak to us, lest we die" (Exodus 20:19). Moses became their go-between.

- God gave Moses the tablets, written with His finger. By the time Moses came down, the people were not breaking the "small" commandments. They had already broken the first one. They had made a golden calf.
- Moses "threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain" (Exodus 32:19). Almost a prophetic picture: no matter what, you are going to break this law. You cannot keep it.

> **ROMANS 8:3** ESV
>
> [3] For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,

Is the problem the law? No. The law comes from the Lord, and it has value when it is used lawfully. But it cannot do what we want it to do, make us righteous, because it is "weakened by the flesh." The problem is us. The law arouses our sinful nature and creates a tension: it tells you exactly what to do, and you can't do it.

That is why Israel's history reads the way it does. God set a clear choice before them: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19). He promised them houses they did not build (Deuteronomy 6:10-11). And they kept choosing death and curse. We look at that and call it foolish. But you do it too.

2. The Letter Kills, but the Spirit Gives Life

Turn to 2 Corinthians 3. In 2 Corinthians, Paul is defending his ministry. The Corinthians were, to say the least, a problem church: Paul told them they were tolerating what was "not tolerated even among pagans" (1 Corinthians 5:1). Teachers had come in questioning Paul's authority and power, and Paul wrote rather than visit in sorrow (2 Corinthians 2:1-4).

At the start of chapter 3 he asks whether they need letters of recommendation. His answer: "You yourselves are our letter of recommendation" (2 Corinthians 3:2). He doesn't need statistics or studies. The question is whether the ministry works. Jesus said the same about false teachers: "You will recognize them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16).

Then, almost as an interruption, one of the most insightful passages in Scripture on grace and the law pours out of him. He writes it because his ministry is the gospel of grace.

> **2 CORINTHIANS 3:4-6** ESV
>
> [4] Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. [5] Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, [6] who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Paul says he is not sufficient in himself: "our sufficiency is from God" (2 Corinthians 3:5). The more revelation you have of grace, the more you see results in people's lives and in the church that can't be explained by anything you brought. The job of preaching is not to preach well. It is to interrupt people's week so the Holy Spirit can do something. Our qualification isn't us. It is the grace of God.

And Paul ends that thought with the line that sets up the rest of the chapter: "For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). The letter versus the Spirit.

3. The Law Is a Composite Whole

Before we go further, we need to establish what the law is.

Paul calls it "the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone" (2 Corinthians 3:7). Pop quiz: what in the Old Testament was carved on stone? Two tablets, one for each hand. **This is the Ten Commandments.**

The Ten Commandments are the cornerstone of the law. Everything in the Law of Moses, the more than 600 commands, flows from them.

Some teachers divide the law into moral, civil and ceremonial parts. They say the sacrifices and ordinances are gone and the civil law is gone, but the moral law is still binding, so whenever Paul talks about the law, he is not talking about the whole law. But they all flow from the Ten Commandments, and **nothing civil or ceremonial was carved in letters on stone.** What Paul calls the ministry of death is the moral heart of the law itself.

Have the congregation say it: The law is a composite whole.

Why does it matter? Nobody in the room feels condemned because they didn't sacrifice a goat this week or pay taxes to the king of Israel. Condemnation comes from the moral law, the part people insist is still in force. You may lift your hands on Sunday and fool people, but you know the Lord sees everything, and you stay away from Him.

4. Two Ministries

> **2 CORINTHIANS 3:7-9** ESV
>
> [7] Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, [8] will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? [9] For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.

Notice two things:

- **The law is called a ministry.** Jesus has a ministry too. There are two ministries here.
- **The law is "the ministry of death" and "the ministry of condemnation."** Jesus' ministry is "the ministry of the Spirit" and "the ministry of righteousness."

Why would God give a law that brings death and condemnation? Because "the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24).

The law is intended to make you see that you are incapable, so you will look to One who is capable. It is designed to bring you to the end of yourself, so that you go to the One who has no end. The law does exactly what it sounds like: it causes death and brings condemnation.

So while the law makes you feel like you are not good enough, Jesus makes you feel good enough, because He's good enough.

5. Bold, Not Like Moses

> 2 CORINTHIANS 3:12-18 ESV
>
> 12 Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, 13 not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face
> so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. 14 But their
> minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains
> unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. 15 Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a
> veil lies over their hearts. 16 But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. 17 Now the Lord is the
> Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face,
> beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory
> to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

"Since we have such a hope, we are very bold" (2 Corinthians 3:12).

Illustration: "You're too much." A preacher recently wrote to tell Pastor Jason he was too bold, too over the top, and should know his place. He wrote back, "Thank you for the sermon illustration." When you see the grace of God, it produces boldness. Walk around town like you know Somebody, because you do. This is going to be a bold church.

"Not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end" (2 Corinthians 3:13). The NASB calls it a fading glory.

Why does this matter? **We have a natural draw toward the law.** The law demands that we reconcile ourselves to God through the flesh, by self-effort. The flesh is looking for something to do to get right with God, and the law offers it a solution: "If I just do this stuff, I'll be right with God."

The law has a glory, but it is fading. It can get someone to the cross. Hard preaching can bring people to salvation, because "the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient" (1 Timothy 1:9).

Illustration: the marshmallow test. Researchers put a marshmallow in front of a child and tell the child not to eat it. You can watch the child straining not to. (Put a mushroom in front of a kid and he'll wait two days.) After salvation, many believers try to live that way: "Now my job is to forsake sin, live righteously and make God happy." You can run on the flesh for a while. Then you admit, "As good as it sounds, I

can't do it." So you either reinterpret Scripture or start living a secret life while acting like you have it together.

Paul saw this happen in Galatia:

- "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6). The different gospel is a gospel of works. Notice the phrase "so quickly."
- "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" (Galatians 3:1). "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3)

What begins in the Spirit must remain in the Spirit. We don't get saved by grace through faith and then turn back to the law.

6. Legalism Brings the Veil Back

"Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts" (2 Corinthians 3:15).

Most preachers don't preach the law outright. They preach a derivative of it: **legalism.** It keeps the Ten Commandments at its center and then gets down into the granular things, just like the law does. "Don't smoke, don't drink, don't chew, don't run around with girls who do." Read your Bible every day. Or the Alabama version, from a roadside sign on I-65: "Go to church or the devil will get you."

Every time the law, or legalism, is preached, a veil comes back over you. You think it will work, but it doesn't. You are veiled to the goodness of God and to the power of the gospel.

"But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed" (2 Corinthians 3:16). When you look at the finished work of Jesus, you can't miss the glory of God. His love, His power and His goodness are evident. Covering your face doesn't work.

7. The Ministry of Reconciliation

There are two ministries in 2 Corinthians 3: the ministry of death and condemnation (Moses, the law) and the ministry of the Spirit, righteousness and life (Jesus, grace). Later in the letter Paul names a third ministry, the one given to gospel preachers and to churches like ours.

> **2 CORINTHIANS 5:18-19** ESV
>
> [18] All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; [19] that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

Think of it in accounting terms, like reconciling a budget. Our job is to help you reconcile what you owe the law against what has been provided by the Lord. When that reconciling is done, you will see that you

cannot live righteously by the law, and that every bit of righteousness you need has been provided at the cross.

Our job is not to preach people into feeling less than, unless it is to point them to the One who is greater: "God is greater than our heart" (1 John 3:20). We point people to Jesus, who is enough, and who, by being enough, makes you enough.

"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1).

Legalism will take the word freedom and turn it into a demand: "You're free, brother, so you'll never sin again. You'll act right." (And we usually only apply that to other people.) But Paul says it is freedom for freedom's sake. Free from what? Sin, condemnation, poverty, sickness. All of it. What do you do with your freedom? Enjoy it, in Jesus Christ.

8. Beholding as in a Mirror

"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

We are not going to do righteousness by behavior in this church. It doesn't work.

The NASB 1995 reads "beholding as in a mirror." The Greek word, *katoptrizō*, means exactly that. It recalls the bronze basin in the tabernacle, made "from the mirrors of the ministering women" (Exodus 38:8). Under the old covenant you looked into it and saw your uncleanness.

Now, with unveiled face, not looking to the law, to legalism, to yourself, or to a church's membership standards for righteousness, we behold the glory of the Lord. And the glory of the Lord is Jesus.

What Jesus has done is so fully credited to you that when you put your faith in Him, it's done: everything you need to be right with God, to be in relationship with Him, to receive from Him, including supernatural breakthrough, healing, health and wholeness. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17). You are the righteousness of God in Christ.

Illustration: the bathroom mirror. You get up in the morning, hair a mess, flossing your teeth. What's looking back at you? The righteousness of God in Christ. "I don't see myself anymore. I see what God has done through Jesus Christ."

In a few weeks this series will talk about a grace confession. Affirmations are fine, but stop talking about yourself so much and start talking about Christ in you. He is fully capable where I am fully limited.

Key line: my beholding is impacting my becoming. As I behold Him and His finished work, and who I already am in the spiritual, the physical manifestation of grace comes about.

Conclusion

“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (Hebrews 10:14). I may look a little funky to you, but in the secret place no one says, “Oh, there’s that guy.” I belong there. He calls me by name, and He doesn’t look at me with disappointment. He looks at me as if I were completely obedient, because through Christ I am.

We are not made righteous by the law. We are made righteous by the finished work of Jesus Christ.



ABOUT

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