Moral Confidence vs. Gospel Confidence

2 Corinthians 3

Have you ever met someone that you would describe as having excellent morals?

I have. In fact, I have had the privilege of meeting some incredibly clean living people in my lifetime. People who could definitely be proud of their achievements in the area of right living. People who with regard to morality have every reason to feel good about themselves. But I realized something this week in one of the conversations I had.

As Christians we have every reason to feel good, but not about ourselves. I found this quote that I believe is applicable:

(trying to keep the law) grants you the power to judge others and feel superior to them. You believe you are living to a higher standard than those you judge. Enforcing rules, especially in its more subtle expressions like responsibility and expectation, is a vain attempt to create certainty out of uncertainty. And contrary to what you might think, I have a great fondness for uncertainty. Rules cannot bring freedom; they only have the power to accuse. — Wm. Paul Young

Unfortunately, there are none who can truly feel good about their own law-keeping. As James wrote:

10 For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God’s laws.

James 2:10 NLT

If you put that into a clear legal example the person who drives 5 miles an hour over the speed limit is just as guilty as the murderer.

Before God, with regard to His Law someone with excellent morals (lest one failure) is just as guilty before Him as the chief of sinners. I emphasize this because Paul, in chapter 3 of his letter to the Corinthians, is going to point out some of the differences between living according to law and living according to the Spirit. Before we begin with that I want to share with you a few of my own observations. You don’t have to agree, but hopefully it will be helpful.

**Morally Confident God Followers**

Lack of Self Awareness/Elevated view of their own righteousness

Flawed high view of their own capabilities (especially pertaining to their holy living)

Minimized view of their need for Christ (They need forgiveness, but not as much as others)

Judgmental (Tendency to view people according to their fleshly mistakes instead of their spiritual beauty)

Added rules that seem righteous (usually things that cater easily to their bent)

Wow factor from a distance…Wanes (sometimes drastically) as you get to know them

Very sure of their own doctrinal purity

Emphasize what God commands them to do

Feel Secure about themselves when they do what is right before God

**Gospel-Living Believers**

Highly reflective which leads to painful self-awareness

Low view of their own capabilities (especially pertaining to their own holiness)

Elevated view of their desperate need for Christ

Have difficulty passing judgment on others because of their self-awareness

Realize that they often fail to keep simple rules so they don’t add more

Not always impressive from a distance…But they demonstrate more love as you get to know them

Wrestle to understand doctrine correctly, but alert to the fact that they could be mistaken

Emphasize what God has inspired them to do

Secure in Christ (not themselves), whether they do right or wrong

With these things in mind, as we study 2 Corinthians 3, it is my hope that you will walk out of here today feeling safe, secure, and good, but not because of your own ability to follow God’s rules.

3 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! 2 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. 3 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.

2 Corinthians 3:1-3 NLT

If you remember one of the reasons Paul wrote this letter in the first place, is because some were questioning his credentials. Paul, was in essence, saying you know me, you have been with me, my ministry to you has been seen among you.

Some people get their credibility through a piece of paper, while others do it through their actions. And the good thing about credentials through actions is that the proof is in the pudding. You can fake a resume’ or a letter of recommendation, but it is extremely difficult to hide when you have prolonged exposure with other people. I have met lots of dirt bike riders who confidently tell me of their riding accomplishments, but after going riding with them it is usually fairly easy to tell whether or not they are full of it or not.

The Apostle Paul wasn’t worried about his paperwork. He didn’t have to look good on paper because his confidence came from knowing and preaching Christ’s accomplishments instead of his own. As he goes on to write:

4 We are confident of all this because of our great trust in God through Christ. 5 It is not that we think we are qualified to do anything on our own. Our qualification comes from God. 6 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 3:4-6 NLT

Paul had lost confidence in his own abilities to be qualified before God. As Paul wrote to the Philippians:

2 Watch out for those dogs, those people who do evil, those mutilators who say you must be circumcised to be saved. 3 For we who worship by the Spirit of God are the ones who are truly circumcised. We rely on what Christ Jesus has done for us. We put no confidence in human effort, 4 though I could have confidence in my own effort if anyone could. Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!

5 I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. 6 I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.

7 I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. 8 Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ 9 and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith.

Philippians 3:2-9 NLT

In fact, Paul once described himself as the “chief of sinners.” That is how much confidence he had in his own abilities. But thankfully he didn’t lose any of his peace and security even though he knew he was the chief of sinners. Because the perception of the old way was an incorrect view of how big and glorious God’s way really is.

Continuing with verse seven he writes:

7 The old way, with laws etched in stone, led to death, though it 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. 8 Shouldn’t we expect far greater glory under the new way, now that the Holy Spirit is giving life? 9 If the old way, which brings condemnation, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new way, which makes us right with God! 10 In fact, that first glory was not glorious at all compared with the overwhelming glory of the new way. 11 So if the old way, which has been replaced, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new, which remains forever!

2 Corinthians 3:7-11 NLT

The 600 plus rules and laws of the Old Testament showed God’s glory a little bit, but it was nothing compared to God’s actual glory. In other words, even if a person managed to keep all those laws they still wouldn’t have been glorious enough to live with God forever. That is why the old way was replaced. Because some people actually thought that the old way would get them there. The old way of following rules won’t get you there. Instead it only leads to condemnation.

Remember how earlier I said that gospel believers have more self-awareness?

That self-awareness destroys our self-confidence in our own spirituality. But thank God it gives us an even stronger confidence.

I will state that in shorter terms. God’s laws destroy our self-confidence and opens the door to a truly confident life. As Paul goes on to say:

12 Since this new way gives us such confidence, we can be very bold. 13 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. 14 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. 15 Yes, even today when they read Moses’ writings, their hearts are covered with that veil, and they do not understand.

2 Corinthians 3:12-15 NLT

Some who heard the law of Moses had a veil that dimmed their view of God’s holiness. In fact it dimmed it so much that they thought they could attain it through their own efforts. And this is still going on to this day.

16 But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. 17 For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 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.

2 Corinthians 3:16-18 NLT

Jesus and His life were the proof in the pudding. Seeing the way Jesus lived, died, was buried, and resurrected demonstrated that God’s glory is far beyond anything we can attain on our own. And believing this is the beginning of true spiritual life. Only then can we truly reflect the finest things of God.

Unbelievers are not going to be saved and transformed into Christ’s likeness by seeing us live out the letter of the law. The letter of the law is meant to bring about the death of self and resurrect us to life according to the Spirit and the law of Christ.

People who live their lives trying to feel good about their own obedience will either hit rock bottom at some point, or worse, they will put thicker and thicker veils over God’s glory and deceive themselves.

Next week we will talk about life according to the Spirit and the Law of Christ.