**GOSPEL FOUNDATIONS**

**WE A.R.E. REVEALING CHRIST**

**2 Corinthians 3:18**

**INTRODUCTION**

Today we’re continuing our series on Gospel Foundations by looking at our Trinitarian Mission Statement: We A.R.E. Our leadership team has chosen one verse for each of the three parts of the Mission Statement. Last Sunday, we had the opportunity to look at the first one, Job 26:14, which reminded us that no matter how much we know about God, all that we know is but a whisper of who he truly is.

Today we look at the second part of our Mission Statement: We A.R.E. “Revealing Christ”. This part of the Mission Statement reminds us that when we are awed by God, it has the effect of making us become more like Jesus. The more we love Christ, the more we reveal Christ to the people around us.

The theological word for this is “sanctification”. Sanctification is the process of growing in holiness. It describes the gradual progress in our lives as we become more and more righteous, and as we learn to hate what is evil and to love what is good. It’s becoming more and more like Jesus every day. Sanctification is what the Christian hopes for, prays for, and works for, so that our lives might bring glory to our Saviour.

Sanctification must not be confused with justification. Sanctification is a process. Justification is not. Justification is a one-time event that happens when you put your trust in Jesus Christ and believe that he died for your sins and rose from the dead as the King of heaven and earth.

When Pastor Ken Mellinger was here three weeks ago, he preached a sermon called “The Gospel in Three Words”. Borrowing from J.I. Packer, he tried to summarize the gospel in the three words: “Adoption through Propitiation”. That was a sermon about many things, but essentially, it was a sermon about justification. It was about what God has done once for all time in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to satisfy his wrath against us and to declare us righteous before him.

Sanctification is different. In his *Systematic Theology*, theologian Wayne Grudem very helpfully sets out the differences between justification and sanctification in the following chart:

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| --- | --- |
| **Justification** | **Sanctification** |
| Legal Standing | Internal Condition |
| Once for all time | Continuous throughout life |
| Entirely God’s work | We cooperate |
| Perfect in this life | Not perfect in this life |
| The same in all Christians | Greater in some Christians than others |

This chart highlights why it’s so important that we not confuse justification with sanctification. When someone says, “I don’t have to work at the Christian life, because God has already done everything for me”, that’s confusing justification with sanctification. It’s true that we don’t contribute anything to our justification, but that’s not true about our sanctification.

Another thing you often hear is people saying, “It doesn’t matter how I live. God has already forgiven all my sins, so I can live however I want.” That’s taking justification without sanctification, but you can’t have one without the other. Jesus said, “You will recognize them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20). A healthy tree (that is, a person who is justified) will bear good fruit (that is, they will grow in righteousness). Those who are justified must be sanctified, and those are sanctified must be justified.

Still others say, “I’m doubting whether I’m truly a Christian, because I’m not as good as all the other Christians I know.” I wonder if that’s you today, if you’ve had moments where you’ve doubted your salvation because you haven’t seen the fruit that you’ve been hoping to see. This is another example of confusing justification with sanctification. You may be less sanctified than others, but that doesn’t mean you’re less justified. Sanctification is greater in some, and less in others. Justification is the same in all. Sanctification isn’t perfect in this lifetime. Justification is perfect. Your sanctification may change, but your justification will not.

It’s crucial that we have a biblical understanding of sanctification, of what it is, and what it is not. We want to be fully committed to pursuing sanctification, both in our private lives and in our public lives together as a church, but we must never forget that our sanctification doesn’t earn us our justification. It is something that comes out of our justification, but it isn’t a precondition for it.

Today’s sermon is about sanctification, and following in Pastor Ken’s footsteps, I’m going to try to summarize it in three words: “Transformation through Revelation”. Sanctification is transformation through revelation, and no verse captures this reality better than 2 Corinthians 3:18:

“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.”

What we’re going to do is study this verse and try to understand what it teaches about sanctification, so that we would increasingly become a church that is revealing Christ.

Let’s break it down into two sections:

1. Transformation
2. Revelation

(1) **TRANSFORMATION**

The first thing I want you to notice is in the middle of the verse. It’s the phrase “being transformed”. This comes from the Greek word *metamorphoo*, which you’ll notice is similar to the word “metamorphosis”.

The word has two meanings. On the one hand, it means “to change in a manner visible to others” (BDAG). It’s a visible transformation, a change that other people can observe. We see this on the Mount of Transfiguration in Matthew 17, where the same word is used to describe what happens to Jesus when he was transfigured before his disciples. You could say that to be transformed is to be so radically changed that those around you can see the difference.

The word can also mean “to change inwardly in fundamental character or condition” (BDAG). It’s not just external change. It’s internal change. Now this clearly wasn’t the case when Jesus was transfigured, since he had no need for internal change. He was already perfectly God, and perfectly man. His transfiguration didn’t change who he was. It merely revealed who he was. But for the rest of us, it means a changing of our innermost being, because our innermost being is tainted by sin and in need of transformation. We need to be changed on the inside first before people are going to see change on the outside.

This is what sanctification is all about. It’s about being changed on the inside out so that people can see the difference. And this is what Paul is talking about in verse 18.

Notice the tense of the words “being transformed”. It doesn’t say “have been transformed” like it’s something that happens once in the past. It’s written in the present sense, “being transformed”, because transformation is always meant to be happening in the Christian’s life.

This means that if you’re not being spiritually transformed, you’re missing out on what it means to live the Christian life. Now, there are times in each of our lives when we may feel that we’re not growing and we can’t see tangible signs of growth in any areas of our lives. That’s normal.

Sometimes it’s just a matter of giving the seeds a little more time to grow. Sometimes it’s because we can’t see the growth, but others can. It’s a fairly normal part of the Christian life to go through seasons of wondering how God is at work in our lives.

But what’s not normal is when neither you, nor the people around you, can see any signs of growth over an extended period of time.

Perhaps you look back at your early days in your Christian walk and you say, “Those were the good old days.” You started off on fire for the Lord, eager to serve, and growing in knowledge and love. But then life wore you down, people disappointed you, churches and pastors failed, and you’re in a season of life when thriving has given way to surviving.

That’s not what the Christian life is meant to look like. We’re not meant to start on a spiritual high only to resign ourselves to a slow and gradual descent into complacency and cynicism. We’re meant to experience a lifetime of being transformed, a lifetime of sanctification, a lifetime of changing in our innermost being in such a way that others can look at our lives and say that we’re changing.

There will be disappointments. People will fail us. We will fail people. Life is going to go sideways at times, and there will be times when it’s really hard to love God and to love people. But the beauty of the Christian life is that these are precisely the sorts of trials and experiences that God ordains in our lives in order to deepen our relationship with him, because we aren’t being transformed despite our sufferings. We’re being transformed *through* our sufferings. That is why Paul can say in Romans 5:4:

“We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope”.

Suffering is often the means of our sanctification. It’s the tool in God’s hand as he gradually works this transformation within us.

But what are we being transformed into? What is the gold standard of our sanctification? What are we becoming more and more like? This is a crucial question, because we can’t assume that all transformation is good. After all, we could be transforming into the wrong thing! Verse 18 says that we are “being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”

When we read the word “image”, our minds often go back to Genesis 1 which says that men and women were made “in the image” of God. But sometimes, the language of “image” doesn’t refer to us. It refers to Christ. We see that a few verses later in 2 Corinthians 4:4:

“…the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

Also Colossians 1:15:

“He is the image of the invisible God”

So what verse 18 is teaching us is that those who are made *in* the image of God are becoming more and more like the one who *is* the image of God. God is working in us in such a way that we are becoming more like what we were always meant to be, and that’s Jesus. Jesus has always been the standard that God used to create us, the template that we were modelled after, and transformation is the process of becoming more and more like him.

We need transformation, because sin has distorted the image of God in all of us. It hasn’t erased it, but it has twisted and corrupted it to the point that we no longer live and function the way that we were meant to. We’re reminded of this every time we hurt another person. We’re reminded of this when we meet people who worship false gods. We’re reminded of this when we take our distinctly human capacities and use them to serve ourselves rather than the God who gave them to us.

We are not what we were meant to be, but if you’re a Christian, God is in the process of restoring his image in you by transforming you into the image of his Son. He’s in the process of sanctifying you.

If you’re not a Christian, you may be thinking, “What about me? I want transformation.” After all, transformation is quite a popular concept in today’s culture. But before you sign up, you need to understand that the world’s understanding of transformation is very different than the Bible’s.

In the world, transformation means upgrading yourself, building yourself up so that you can get the kind of life you’ve always wanted. The world teaches that you need transformation because you lack confidence, or you need more skills. But the Bible teaches us that the reason why we need transformation is because of our sin. It’s a moral problem. We love what is evil and hate what is good and reject the God who made us, and the point of transformation is to reverse all this and make us more like Jesus.

We don’t need transformation because we lack self-confidence or we need more skills. We need transformation because we’re sinners. Our sin has distorted God’s image in us, and we need that image restored. And as that image is restored, we become more like Jesus in two ways. We love people more. We have compassion for the lost, we lay down our lives in service to others, we even love our enemies.

But as important as loving people may be, it isn’t the essence of becoming like Jesus. The essence of becoming like Jesus is growing in our love for God. Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength is the greatest command. Loving our neighbour is like it, but it’s not the same. Nor does it come first. The first command, and the command we must devote most of our attention and energy to, is the command to love God.

Becoming like Jesus means loving God, then loving people, not vice versa. When we love God, and then we love people because we love God, that’s worship. But when we love people, and then we love God because we love people, that’s idolatry.

St. Augustine famously put it this way in his *Confessions*:

“He loves thee too little, who loves anything together with thee, which he loves not for thy sake.”

This is often true of us, but it was never true of Jesus. Jesus never loved his Father too little, because everything he loved, he loved for his Father’s sake. That includes us. Jesus didn’t just come for us because he loves us (though that’s certainly true). He came for us because he loves us for the sake of his love for his Father. The Father who sent the Son to die for us, and the Son willingly obeyed his Father, because he delights to do his Father’s will.

In his book *Delighting in the Trinity*, Michael Reeves writes:

“At the heart of our transformation into the likeness of the Son is our sharing of his deep delight in the Father.”

This is what transformation looks like. We need continual transformation because we’re sinners, and the fact that we’re sinners means that we love God too little. But as we become more like Jesus, we inherit his love for his Father, a love that is rich, and deep, and pure. And when we begin to love the Father like Jesus does, then we begin to love others in the way that we were always meant to. We love our enemies. We love the unlovable.

Paul describes this love as glorious in verse 18, and as we grow in love we grow from one degree of glory to another, because it more closely resembles the glory of our Saviour. We are called to be transformed into the likeness of Christ, and that means being transformed in our love for God, and our love for others.

(2) **REVELATION**

But how do we do that? How do we seek this transformation and experience it continually in our lives? The answer is found in the rest of our verse, and to the rest of our three-word summary: Transformation through *Revelation*.

The key word in verse 18 that tells us how to be transformed into becoming more like Jesus is the word “beholding”. Notice again that it’s not written in the past tense, because it’s not just something that we do once. It’s something that we do continually throughout our lifetimes, and as we do, we are changed. Beholding Jesus continually is what leads to continually becoming like Jesus.

This is a radical idea, because it tells us that what we see shapes who we become. This isn’t the only place in the Bible that teaches this. In Luke 11:34, Jesus said,

“Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body is full of darkness.”

We are more influenced by what goes into our eyes than we realize. If we’re always looking at the world, we’re going to become worldly people. If we’re always looking at ourselves, we’re going to become selfish people. But if we’re looking at Jesus, we’re going to become more and more like him in the beauty and glory of his character.

But how do we see Jesus when he’s not physically with us? We see him through the eyes of faith through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Notice the end of verse 18: “For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” The Spirit opens the eyes of our hearts to see Jesus and to be transformed by him, because we walk by faith, not by sight. The Spirit enables us to see Jesus by faith when we hear him preached, when we sing his praises, and we read about him in his Word.

What does Paul mean when he writes that we behold the Lord with an “unveiled face”? If you read the context, you’ll see that the imagery of a veiled face is taken from Moses. In Exodus 34, we read that Moses used to appear before God and speak with God at the top of Mount Sinai. When he came down from the mountain, his face would be shining so brightly that the people of Israel would be afraid to come near him, so he would put a veil over his face. This became a pattern. Every time he went to speak with God, he would remove the veil, and when he returned to the people, he would put the veil back on.

So when Paul writes in verse 18 that “we all, with unveiled face” are “beholding the glory of the Lord”, he’s saying that Christians get to enjoy the same personal relationship with God that Moses enjoyed. In Exodus, Moses was the only one who was entitled to appear before God. Exodus 33:11 actually says that “the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend”, but no one else had this privilege. None. Not Aaron. Not Joshua. Only Moses. He was the only mediator between God and his people. If they wanted to approach God, they had to go through him.

But here in verse 18, Paul is saying that all of us – not just him, not just some, but *all* Christians – appear before God with unveiled faces to behold the glory of the Lord. We are given the same unspeakable privilege of speaking to God face to face, as one speaks to a friend, because we don’t need an earthly mediator anymore. Christ is our mediator. He has paid our debt of sin, he has suffered God’s wrath on our behalf, and now we have personal, instant access to the God of glory himself. And it’s this fellowship, this relationship, this personal *beholding* that transforms us and makes us more like Jesus.

There are at least two more layers of meaning behind this imagery of the unveiled face. In verses 12-13, Paul explains why Moses put the veil on his face:

“Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, 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.”

In other words, Moses was a little embarrassed. He was embarrassed that the glory of God that shone on his face and made the people tremble had the habit of fading away, because it wasn’t a permanent glory. It was temporary.

That is not the case with us. The glory that shines on our faces as we fellowship with God never leaves. It stays with us. There’s no need for us to veil our faces in embarrassment because the glory that shines on us never fades. It’s a permanent glory that comes from permanent transformation into the image of Jesus Christ our Saviour. That’s why verse 12 says “we are very bold”. We can be bold as we approach the throne room of God, because Christ is our mediator, and because Christ is our transformer. He is changing us into his likeness in a way that will never diminish or fade.

The last part of what it means to behold the Lord with an “unveiled face” is found in verses 14-15, where Paul takes the imagery of Moses’ veil and uses it as a symbol of our sinful depravity:

“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. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts.”

Paul’s making a statement about human nature. He’s saying that, left to ourselves, we could never see the glory of God and be transformed by it. There’s a veil on our hearts that keeps us from being sanctified and changed. But then he says in verse 16:

“But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.”

This is what happens when someone becomes a Christian. We turn to the Lord and the veil is removed. And this is why we can talk about Transformation through *Revelation*. We need Christ to be revealed to us, because the veil on our hearts keeps us from seeing him as he truly is.

But when you turn away from your sin and turn towards the Lord through the work of the Spirit in you, the veil over your heart is removed, and you become one who can approach the Lord and see him like you’ve never seen him before. Christ is revealed to you, and you can see him with an unveiled face and an unveiled heart, beholding the glory of the Lord and being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

This is how sanctification works. This is how Christ is revealed and imprinted into our lives. Transformation through revelation.

If you’re here today and you’re not a Christian, you need to know that there’s a veil over your heart so that you cannot see what the Christian sees. You may see glimpses of it, little glimpses of God’s glory, but then when you leave here you forget about it and you continue your life as if nothing happened.

Don’t be content with that. Turn to the Lord and have the veil over your heart removed, so that when you hear Christians sing about Christ, you wouldn’t just see words and ideas. You would see glory. Or when we look for Jesus in the Scriptures together during the sermon, you wouldn’t just see me standing here as a man on a stage pointing to words on a page. You would see Jesus through those words and come to behold his glory and be transformed by it. We want you to see what we see, but you must turn to the Lord.

Now, we need to ask one more question of our text today before we conclude today: what are we to look at when we behold the glory of the Lord? Moses just had to climb Mount Sinai to behold God’s glory, because God was there. He was there in the splendour and majesty of his glory, shining with the light of his presence. But what about us? How do we behold the glory of the Lord?

For that, we need to turn to two verses in Chapter 4. In verse 6, Paul says:

“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

God’s glory is in the face of Jesus Christ. When we see Jesus Christ, we see God’s glory. But then notice what Paul adds in verse 4:

“…the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

It’s in the gospel that we see the glory of Christ, and it’s in the glory of Christ that we see the glory of God. That means that transformation comes from beholding the gospel. We are transformed into the likeness of Christ through the revelation of his glory in the gospel.

This is why we need to be a gospel-centered church. It’s the only way we can truly be transformed. We won’t be transformed by being a morality-centered church, or a community-centered church, or an outreach-centered church. We will be transformed by being a gospel-centered church, a church that beholds the glory of the Lord in the face of Jesus Christ as he laid down his life for sinners.

John Calvin said this:

“in the cross of Christ, as in a magnificent theatre, the inestimable goodness of God is displayed before the whole world. In all the creatures…the glory of God shines, but nowhere has it shone more brightly than in the cross.”

There’s glory in the gospel that we can’t find anywhere else, and it is in beholding that glory that we will receive power through the Spirit to truly be transformed.

**CONCLUSION**

We A.R.E. Revealing Christ. That’s the kind of church we want to be, a church full of people who are showing the world what Jesus is like by becoming more like him every day. But in order to do that, we need to be serious about the gospel. The gospel is the foundation of our justification, and it is the foundation of our sanctification.

If we are to truly be sanctified, transformed in our inmost being into the increasing glory of becoming like Jesus, we need to center our lives on the gospel. And that means far more than talking about it. It means enjoying it. Savouring it. Beholding it.

There’s a difference between noticing that something is beautiful and actually enjoying its beauty. You could glance up on a clear night and see the stars and say, “That’s nice”, or you could stop and stare for awhile and get lost in the ocean of tiny lights above you. That’s what beholding is like.

And so, when you’re reading your Bible at home, you need to look for Jesus. It doesn’t matter if you’re in the Old Testament or the New Testament, the Psalms or Paul’s letters, You need to look for Jesus. And when you’ve found him, don’t just move on as if you’ve solved a puzzle. Linger there. Meditate on his love. Behold his glory.

Or when you’re here at church, singing songs about Christ, don’t do it passively. Think about the words. Meditate on them. Let them lead you to Christ. When you’re hearing the sermon preached, look for Christ, listen for his love, and linger at the cross. If we do, if we behold the glory of the Lord in the face of Christ crucified, then the Spirit will do the wonderful work of transforming us into the image of our Saviour.

May Christ be revealed in us, for the glory of God, and for the joy of his people.