

Back in the days of dialup internet, images online used to take a while to load. At first you'd see a pixelated image, which would slowly become more resolved as the data was being transferred. Similarly, when we first come to faith in Jesus, our image of Him is very basic and unresolved. Then as we grow, we gain a clearer picture of who He is. And as 2 Corinthians 3:18 explains, the more we look, the more the picture becomes clearer, and the more we grow and are transformed into His likeness. Our goal is to stare at the face of Jesus, and by doing so we grow to be like Him and become better witnesses for Him. And we stare at the face of Jesus by studying God's word. This is how we know Jesus better. Scripture nourishes us so we can grow.

In this chapter, Paul concludes the discussion about his reputation, which was under attack by leaders who accused him of being flippant and unreliable. Previously, Paul explained that he had right intentions for not visiting them, and that it was for their benefit. Now, he says that he knows that his intentions were justified because he knows he is committed to preaching God's word. In vv. 1-6 he explains that his comfort and confidence in his decisions stems from knowing his primary commitment is to the ministry of Christ. He doesn't need a résumé to prove his trustworthiness (vv. 1-2). Back in Paul's day, traveling teachers and philosophers going to new cities often brought with them a letter of reference from someone that the community knew. This way the people of that city could know whether the teacher was trustworthy or not. But Paul says that he doesn't need a letter because the Corinthians are his letter. Their growth is the proof of Paul's dedication to the gospel, and that his motives were consistent with this commitment.

In vv. 4-6 he says that this competence in ministry is not from himself, but from God. I struggle with insecurity and the desire to please others. Prior to retreat I was nervous about whether people would show up, but in the end we had many more than we hoped for. It's tempting to congratulate ourselves on organizing a great retreat, but then we would be putting our confidence in our perceived success rather than in God. Our confidence should come from doing the right thing, not from people liking us. Jeremiah was called the Weeping Prophet because though he preached the word of God, nobody responded to it. So often we measure success and failure using metrics and numbers. We measure our popularity online by the number

of likes we get. But Paul isn't concerned with being liked, but rather he is concerned with gospel work. Likewise those in ministry should be concerned with the work of the gospel rather than being caught up in attendance or donation figures.

In vv. 7-11 Paul explains why the gospel is worth all his energy by comparing this New Covenant he preaches to the Old Covenant of Sinai. The Old Covenant brings judgment, condemnation, and death. It is written on cold, rigid, and lifeless stone. And its glory is transitory; yet there is still glory in it, such that Moses had to veil his face so the people would not see the full intensity of this fading glory. But the New Covenant is even more glorious, because it brings righteousness rather than death. It is written on our hearts rather than stone. And it is for everlasting glory. It is a better message. The Old Covenant tells us to obey or face the consequences. The New Covenant tells us that we can't do anything on our own, and Jesus has done everything for us. The Law imprisoned us, but through Jesus we have freedom (v. 17). Don't let our performance-based culture bleed into our spiritual lives. The Old Covenant was about doing; the New Covenant is about being. We don't earn this freedom with service. We serve in the freedom God has freely given. This freedom means the absence of the burden of guilt on our consciences. Also, in the Old Covenant, Moses and the veil stood between God and man. Now we come to God directly through Jesus. The superiority of the gospel should embolden us. We who can approach the unveiled glory of God no longer need to hide behind a veil, but should boldly reflect His glory to others (v. 12).

So we learned that the gospel we put our confidence in is far better than the Old Covenant. Thus we stare at the face of Jesus by contemplating God's nourishing word. And so we grow slowly and steadily, just as children grow steadily when they are fed every day. I decided to continue preaching the word of God today, rather than speaking mainly on the devastation of the recent hurricanes, because we need this nourishment to grow. Let us pray for those in the midst of this devastation, but also let us look at the face of Jesus. And as we grow, we will learn how to better respond to the disasters and suffering in the world.