

## THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

28<sup>th</sup> November 2004

### 2 Corinthians 3 Guiding Principal

Whether we realise it or not, we all live our lives by a number of guiding principles. Of course, each person's principles are different, and for some they will remain subconscious for all of their lives. Also, they may change from time to time as events shape the way we live our lives.

But psychologists love these principles, and find them useful in helping people to get the most out of life, whether someone is recovering from mental illness, going through a mid-life crisis, or coping with some traumatic life event. At the very least, they give a focus for day to day living; at their best, they give vision and inspiration for the larger purpose of life. Knowing your principles and being able to live by them is a root to self-esteem, which in turn is a vital part of our mental health.

Most people may not realise this, but finding the right principles, which you can live consistently with, is a secret to a happy life.

Have a think about these guiding principles, and see what you think:

- *Be loving, sympathetic, concerned, respectful, and helpful with others, not greedy or controlling or aggressive.*
- *Have fun without getting too involved with others. You can't control the world so enjoy life, for tomorrow you may die. To fully enjoy life, think of "number one" first; let yourself go!*
- *Get involved with others for fun and achieving common goals. Give of yourself to others to make this "the good life," don't withdraw or be self-centered.*
- *Accept all philosophies, not just one. Fun, action, and contemplation in equal proportions is the best way to live.*
- *Stop seeking, be receptive, then wisdom and the good things of life will come freely.*
- *Constantly seek self-control, firmly directed by reason and high ideals. Guard against seduction by comfort, selfish impulses, the urge to "cop-out" etc.*

Now there is much to be commended in many of these principles, while others of course have more hedonistic than Christian undertones. Not surprising, as they come from a secular mental-help organisation!

While the post-modern way is to let a person decide their own values from a menu of possibilities – or better still, to encourage them to invent or synthesise some new ones – the Christian worldview is that some principles are good, and some bad. Such absolute judgement can be made because there is an absolute standard to measure things against – God himself. Anything which takes us further from God or makes us less like him is bad, while everything that brings us closer to God and makes us more like him is good. Instinctively, we can classify most of those principles into those two camps.

The question of guiding principles is not just an academic one. God is really there, he is the source of all life, and to be away from him is to die. So it is vital that our guiding principles guide us to God.

Paul understood this full well. As we have seen, his concern in 2 Corinthians, and many more of his letters, is to equip the young church with the knowledge and power it needed to keep true to God and away from error of any sort.

Now you may remember from the overview of the book a few weeks ago, that Paul spends time defending his own ministry to the Corinthians, against accusations and opposition from other people who had infiltrated the church. So at the start of this chapter, Paul counters one of the accusations – that he needed some sort of reference to be acceptable to the Corinthians. What nonsense, he says, *you* are my reference! Mere words written in ink are nothing compared to the testimony of their own lives, which have been transformed by Christ through Paul's ministry.

In typical fashion for Paul, this thought triggers a digression from his initial subject, where he sets out some key spiritual matter. I imagine that he was so absorbed by the Gospel in all its fullness, that pretty much any experience or subject gave him an opportunity to relate it back to the Gospel. In this case, the contrast between a physical written letter and the metaphorical letter of their lives reminds Paul of the contrast between the Old and New Covenants – and so the rest of the chapter is given over to this subject.

Although in a sense this is a digression from his effort to defend his ministry, it is not a digression from his underlying purpose – which is to see the Corinthians built up in their faith. Reminding them of the wonder of God's salvation is a great way to do this – for ultimately, it is not their affiliation to Paul which matters, but their closeness to Christ.

Now there were many issues which threatened the early church, including ideas from the surrounding pagan religions. But the biggest threat, as it often is, was much more subtle and close to home.

Consider the following guiding principle:

*Live in obedience to the Law. Observe the festivals and keep the commands, so that you will receive God's blessing.*

This seems pretty orthodox, even very biblical. God's Law is good, his commands wise and for our benefit, and he has promised blessings for those who keep them. This was a popular teaching from the Jewish contingent in the early church, and if you ask the proverbial man in the street they will probably tell you it is still the teaching of the church today. It is a summary of what Paul refers to as the Old Covenant.

Consider now this alternative guiding principle:

*Allow God to work in your life through his Spirit, trust in his righteousness and not your own, so that he can make you ever more Christ-like and glorious.*

There is a world of difference here, for this is the Good News of the New Covenant.

The first principle was promoted by those who had failed to see that a New Covenant was now in force; and they failed to see this largely because they had failed to see what the Old Covenant was really about in the first place. So too the legalistic Christian position today is promoted by those who have failed to understand what the Gospel message is really about.

Now discussions about covenants may sound about as interesting as reading the small print on your washing machine's extended warranty, but it is actually very relevant – for at least two reasons. Firstly, the purpose of the covenants is of vital importance and should be supremely interesting. And secondly, the New Covenant is the secret to living that happy and fulfilled life which everyone wants.

The covenants were made between God and us, his creation, with the purpose of restoring our relationship with him. This is of overwhelming importance, not just because we can be re-united with our true Father, with all that entails for our roots, heritage, and identity; but also because it affects our well-being both now and forever.

We have studied much of the Old Covenant recently when we were going through Exodus – indeed, we looked briefly at tonight's passage for its reference to Moses' shining face. The covenant with Israel was made when the Ten Commandments and other laws were given to Moses on Mount Sinai. This showed us what God's standards were, but also the distance between God and Man and the need for sacrifice to pay for our shortcomings.

It's important not to misinterpret what Paul is saying about this Old Covenant. Too often today we think of Old things as not only out-dated but also primitive, inferior and of no real value. With a few exceptions, such as Victorian fireplaces and baths, we want to distance ourselves from things not just of a bygone age, but of a bygone fashion! But that is not Paul's view at all. In itself, the Law was good; indeed, in Romans 7:14 Paul calls it spiritual.

But the Old Covenant was not intended as the permanent solution to the gulf between God and Man. It was always a time-limited arrangement, destined to be replaced in due course.

Significantly, at the same time God was giving the covenant laws to Moses, the Israelites were breaking the most fundamental law through their idolatry with the Golden Calf. Right from the word go, it was obvious that they – or should I say we – could not keep their side of the bargain.

This is why Paul refers to its fading glory, and why the glow on Moses face faded – even then God was showing the Israelites that this was not a permanent solution to allow him to dwell with them.

Sadly, many Jews did think the Old Covenant was the be all and end all, and as Paul says they saw it through a veil. They saw the way to God to be through obedience to the letter of the commandments.

In reality, this could not bring them near to God. Of itself, it did not bring us life, but death: for we are all shown to fail to keep the commandments, and hence to come under judgement with the punishment of death. With the veil removed, it is clear that this all points to the need for a New Covenant, which CAN restore our relationship.

There are two quite startling passages in the Old Testament which explicitly reveal that a New Covenant is necessary.

Jeremiah 31:31-34:

*“The time is coming,” declares the LORD,  
“when I will make a new covenant  
with the house of Israel*

*and with the house of Judah.*

<sup>32</sup> *It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.*

<sup>33</sup> *"This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD.*

*"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.*

<sup>34</sup> *No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD.*

*"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*

Ezekiel 36:25-27:

<sup>25</sup> *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*

From the outset, the purpose of the Old Covenant was to point to the need for the new, and in particular the need for our Saviour Jesus Christ. There is no conflict between Old and New; they both come from the same God, with the same purpose. The Old sets the scene and points the way to the New, while the New makes full sense only in light of the Old.

The New Covenant was forged not by fire and smoke up a mountain, but by blood and sweat on a cross. Jesus himself inaugurated this during the Last Supper, in Luke 22:20:

<sup>20</sup> *In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.*

By that sacrifice, the death that the Old Covenant demanded was paid – clearing the way for us to live with God. And the mark of this New Covenant is not the engraving of letters on stone, but the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, giving us life and not death.

The Old Covenant had been glorious, but its time had past. It's glory had faded, having served its purpose to prepare the way for the New. To continue to live under it was both sad and stupid!

The key to making this New Covenant available to us was the death of Christ in our place. That dealt once and for all with the consequences of our sin, so that we can now enjoy the same closeness to God that Adam and Eve had before they first sinned. As the OT passages we read promised, the heart of this new relationship is our own changed hearts – hearts filled with God’s own Holy Spirit, so that God does indeed dwell in his people.

Without the Holy Spirit, we would be back in the same situation as under the Old Covenant, when it came to the way we live our lives. By Christ’s sacrifice, the penalty for our sins would have been paid; but without his Spirit we would still struggle with the power of sin in our day to day lives.

The Spirit changes us from the inside out, cleansing our hearts and changing our desires, so that we are no longer ruled by what Paul elsewhere calls “the desires of the flesh”, but instead desire spiritual things. That process starts the moment we become Christians, and continues throughout our lives.

This does not mean that we will be perfect, as Paul himself testifies to. He could not claim to be competent in or of himself – he recognised his competence came from God. There is no real surprise here – every great leader in the Bible could say the same thing, Moses being a prime example with his speech impediment and initial reluctance to lead God’s people. Our ongoing weakness demonstrates all the more that the glory is God’s and not our own.

But if we have to accept that we will continue to be weak, this does not mean we should be complacent about our lives. The Spirit does not force himself on us, he does not force us to do good instead of evil. We are always free to ignore him, though whenever we do it is to our harm. Indeed, there can be long periods where we make no progress, or even slip back into behaviour which is more of the “flesh” than the “spirit”.

This is not how the Christian life is intended to be; for God’s intention is that we should be transformed so that we become more like Christ. The driver for change, for increased holiness, is not any disciplinarian wish to keep rules and regulations as many did in the Old Covenant; rather, the driver must be our relationship with Christ Himself, through his Spirit. The more time we spend with him, reading his word, praying and worshipping, then the more we will be inspired to be like him. If we live more in obedience to his ways now, it is because we want to let the Spirit help us, not because we slavishly or fearfully follow a set of rules.

The importance and significance of having the Holy Spirit cannot be overstated. Remember when the Law was given, that God was not able to dwell freely in the midst of his people? He had to remain separate, his glory was too great for them to bear. Hence the veil of Moses face, and the curtains round the Holy of Holies. But now he dwells intimately in our hearts - we could not get any closer to him than that! And far from shrinking from his glory, we begin to take on some of that very glory as our lives are transformed.

Perhaps you can see why Paul was so passionate that the Corinthians should stay with the true Gospel – for it is glorious! What a thought – to be transformed into the likeness of Christ! What more could a father want for his children, or a pastor for his flock?

You see, Christianity is not about keeping rules, it's about a relationship. The closer that relationship becomes, the more we will become like Christ. Neither is holiness a stayed, dull, old-fashioned or dreary thing. It is attractive and dynamic, indeed, it is freedom!

Now the idea of freedom, like many things, has been turned on its head in our culture. Freedom is commonly held to be the ability to do whatever you want to do, without fear of consequence. Freedom is to live your life as you see fit, with no externally imposed standards.

While this notion seems attractive and logical, it falls down completely when you realise that there *are* external standards, and there are serious consequences if you ignore them. As an extreme example, we may consider we have the freedom to live anywhere we want to. If I want to move back to Scotland, or to move to Cornwall, I am free to do so. But suppose I decide to live underwater. Without a supply of oxygen, I will quickly drown. My freedom to make that choice is in practice limited by the externally imposed reality of my body's need for air-borne oxygen, and the absence of such an environment under water. In theory I could make that choice; but it would be both stupid and disastrous.

Another point which post-modern philosophy is prone to forget is the external reality that we are not just individuals. We did not get here by ourselves, and we do not live our lives independently from everyone else. It is not just individual freedom which matters, but freedom for society. It is quite simply a lie, out of kilter with reality, to say that all that is important is your own happiness. That *is* important; but so is the happiness of your friend, neighbour, wife, boss, and all the other 6 billion people on the planet!

So the freedom that the Spirit brings is not just an individualistic thing, but a corporate thing too. As a people, we are free – and that only happens when there is mutual respect and consideration. If you want another example, you could argue that we are free to drive on either side of the road. Some countries choose the left hand side, others the right – there is no particular reason to choose one over the other. But that choice has to be a corporate choice – otherwise chaos would ensue! The external reality that other people want to travel on the same road as us means that our freedom of movement is best served by sticking to the convention of driving on the left!

The ultimate external reality is the existence of God. Anything which runs counter to him has consequences, both in what we call the “natural” world, as well as spiritually. So it will be much better to choose to do what is consistent with God's character and purposes. The trouble is, without the Holy Spirit the power of sin in our lives keeps dragging us back to harmful ways. This is what we are set free from – we are free to live compatibly with God.

To the non-Christian mind, this seems to be a narrow and restricted life, just as holiness seems dull and stayed. But in fact, there is more scope for us to exercise choice and freedom within the bounds of God's ways, and our lives will be the more fulfilled because we are free from the harmful consequences – for ourselves and others - of bad choices.

After all, the most free being in existence is God himself, yet he is also the most holy!

Sadly few people see that this is the case. Paul refers to a veil being over the hearts of the Jews when Moses (i.e. the Old Testament) is read; this same factor is also apparent today. The Good News is not intellectually taxing, it is not like some complicated mathematical formula that only the most learned can understand. But it is morally taxing, in that we need to give up any pretence of our own goodness to understand its truth and see its glory. So it is that people reject the Gospel, reject holiness, reject God himself, because they would rather cling onto their own self-sufficiency. Only if that veil is taken away will they see clearly and understand the truth. And that veil is only removed by turning to Christ.

Removing the veil means that we can see the difference between those two guiding principles we looked at earlier. The first pseudo-Christian principle was:

*Live in obedience to the Law. Observe the festivals and keep the commands, so that you will receive God's blessing.*

But that is not a principle we can ever live consistently with. The second, in contrast, will always satisfy:

*Allow God to work in your life through his Spirit, trust in his righteousness and not your own, so that he can make you ever more Christ-like and glorious.*

How do we know that this will satisfy us forever? Because the Spirit himself is our guarantee, our assurance, and our true Guiding Principal.