

"A Better Covenant"

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[0 : 00] Good morning. If you would please turn with me to 2 Corinthians chapter 3. You'll find it on page 1776 of the Pew Bibles.

We will be continuing our study in 2 Corinthians. I found it necessary to slow down a bit this week and we will be covering just half of a verse.

You may have noticed in the bulletin that the sermon is titled, A Better Covenant. This is because Paul in this verse will be talking about the new covenant and how it is better than the old covenant. In the book of Hebrews it says that you do not need a new covenant if the old covenant is perfect. But rather that because God speaks about a new covenant it means that the old covenant was lacking in some ways and it was then necessary for God to make a new, a better, a more perfect covenant.

In thinking about it, it made me think about how my father is a gadgets guy. He has all sorts of widgets and husamawatsits that do certain things really well.

[1 : 30] He's always got a gadget for the task, which ends up creating certain interactions where I'll come home and he'll inform me, Hey, we got a new spatula.

And I go, a new spatula? Why do we need a new spatula? What's wrong with the old one? Is this, you know, like, it works. Why do we need a new one? Right.

Lo and behold, the new spatula, you know, splits up ground beef really well, you know. So the reason we need a new spatula is because it works better than the old.

Or a new strainer. Why do we need a new strainer? We've already got one, you know. Why is that not good enough? Well, this you just put on the pan and you dump it and it's easy to clean.

It takes up less space. That's why we need a new strainer. In the same way, the old covenant has some good things to it, like the old strainer and the old spatula.

[2 : 38] But the new covenant is better. And so when Paul talks in this verse about the new covenant, we should be looking for the features of it that are better than the old.

And so we'll be thinking about that today as we read in 2 Corinthians 3, verse 6. I hope you already heard it there.

The new covenant, this idea of the better thing that has come with better features. And so this is what we're going to be meditating on today.

Before I dive too deeply into what this passage is saying, I want to talk a bit about what a covenant is. We've probably heard this word in passing here and there, but it's not common enough that we would be able to explain precisely what a covenant is.

So a covenant is a relational agreement between two parties. Probably the most often form of this in our culture is marriage.

[4 : 01] Marriage is a covenant. That's the type of agreement that it is. Friendships are sometimes kind of an informal covenant. And you can think of a covenant as being like a contract, but more personal, more relational than technical.

The words of a contract are technical and precise. Whereas the, because contracts are about establishing rules that can be argued directly and clearly legally in the courts of law and things like that.

Whereas covenants, the wording tends to be more vague and relational in nature. To think about the example of a marriage, think about the marriage vows.

They're not precise contractual language saying, you know, okay, I agree to spend with you five hours a week until I die. I will have breakfasts with you three times a week, dinner with you six times.

You know, this is not the words of the marriage vow because it's not a contract. It's a covenant. Instead, it has words to have and to hold, to love and to cherish for better or for worse.

[5 : 23] These are covenant words that no contract could ever replace. They're vague and relational in nature instead of technical and precise like a contract.

No contract, no matter how long, could ever spell out all of the nuances and the shades of meaning that come up in a relationship.

And so for relationship agreements, for the commitment that healthy relationships are based on, you need a type of agreement that is more relational.

And that's what covenants are. So what comes out of a covenant is a relationship between two people or groups of people.

And that relationship comes with obligations. It comes with duties, with blessings and with promises. So this is helpful for us to understand because God deals with humanity through covenants.

[6 : 31] This is the way that God interacts with his creation is by these relational agreements that he has made over the course of human history. They are all over the Bible.

There's the covenant that God makes with God. There's the covenant that God makes with Abraham, a covenant that God makes with Moses and the Israelites, a covenant that God makes with David, just to name some of the big ones.

There's even more covenants if you pay close attention to the scriptural narrative, just to look further. And then even in these last days, he has made a covenant with us in Christ.

This is the way that God deals with his creation is through these relational agreements. Even the Bible we read is actually divided into sections by the covenants.

You have the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Latin word for covenant is testamentum, which is where we get that term.

[7 : 41] So our Bible itself is divided and organized by this idea of covenants, of relational agreements, where you have the Old Covenant, that was God's former way of relating to man, his first agreement that existed for a long time.

And then with Christ came the New Covenant, which was a new way of God interacting with his people, to put it simply. So it is helpful for us to understand how central covenants are to the Bible and to its structure.

Everything we read in Scripture cannot be understood properly if it's taken out of its covenantal context. If we take passages from the Old Covenant and try to apply them as if they're New Covenant passages, they do not work properly and they will lead us astray.

You may have heard people talking about Christian hypocrisy and they say, well, if you're a Christian and you say we should believe the Bible, why do you eat pork?

Or why do you wear two different types of fabric? These are different rules that are given in the Old Covenant for how the people of God are to behave.

[9 : 04] And the reason why that isn't actually hypocrisy is because we are not under the Old Covenant and we are not under the Old Covenant laws.

There are truths for us to gain from the Old Covenant, but we cannot read them like we read the New Covenant, where when we read in the New Testament, you cannot forsake the gathering of believers.

That is a command that we must all obey. But when we read in the Old Testament that you cannot eat anything that comes from a pig because it's an unclean animal, that does not apply to us because we are not Old Testament believers.

So understanding the context of covenants is very important because it helps us to understand the Bible. So if you want to grow in your ability to read and understand Scripture, which we should all want to do, you'll need to understand the covenants of the Bible better.

I also want you to know that we are going to be talking a lot about covenants in the coming weeks. Paul in this chapter spends the whole last half of this chapter talking about covenants and why the New Covenant is better than the Old.

[10 : 31] He does this because the people he is writing to are a New Covenant people and they need to know what that means. And he wants them, because they are a New Covenant people, to think, to live, to rejoice like a New Covenant people.

To live in light of the truths. Think about a married man who forgets his New Covenant and starts living his life as if he's not married.

There's going to be issues there. And so it's important that we're always clear in our head that we are a New Covenant people and that we are clear on what that means for us today.

And this is part of the reason why we celebrate the Lord's Supper once a month. It is a ceremony that reminds us of that New Covenant reality.

It is like you'll hear about these vow renewal services where a married couple who has been married for a time will have almost like a second wedding to remind themselves of the vows they made to each other.

[11 : 52] In the same way, last Sunday we celebrated the Lord's Supper as a covenant renewal ceremony. where we reminded ourselves of the covenant that we live in, the New Covenant.

That's why we read Jesus' words that he said at the Last Supper. This is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood.

Drink this in remembrance of me. I want you to understand that whenever we do that, we are reminding ourselves that we are in a committed, formal relationship to God, this New Covenant.

And so that's why we celebrate this every week. So having a foundational understanding of what covenants are and some of the ways they apply to us, let's look at what Paul is talking about here when he speaks of why the New Covenant is better than the old.

He's trying to get the Corinthians to understand the significance of the New Covenant. And so he describes it, the New Covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit.

[13 : 16] So he highlights that the feature of this New Covenant is that it is not by the letter, but by the Spirit. So let's think a little bit about what that means.

When Paul speaks of the letter here, what he is speaking of is the letter of the law. You may have heard this saying, you know, talking about the letter of the law, meaning the exact wording of laws and how they apply to situations.

It refers to the fact that legal statements, that laws that are laid down tend to have precise an exact nature that you can follow directly and logically, like you can follow the words in a book.

The letter of the law is the way that the law draws an exact line, saying if you are on that side, you are a law keeper, and if you cross it, you are a law breaker.

The letter of the law draws these lines. And so the Old Covenant, which the New Covenant replaces, came with a series of laws which drew many lines in the sand that could not be crossed, and that if you broke them, you would be a criminal deserving punishment.

[14 : 47] So Paul compares the Old Covenant with its series of laws to the New Covenant, which is by the Spirit. Many of us may have heard people talk about the letter of the law versus the spirit of the law, meaning the letter of the law is when you follow exactly what it says, where the spirit of the law is when you follow its purpose.

That is not what Paul is talking about here. He is not talking about the spirit of the law. You know, he is not talking about, you know, if I was to tell my nephew here, don't put your hand in the cookie jar, and he goes over with a fork and fishes a cookie out.

Like, he's obeyed the letter, but he's broken the spirit of the law. By breaking the cookie jar. Exactly. That is not what Paul's talking about.

He's not comparing obedience to the literal words and obedience to the actual purpose. What he's comparing is obedience to a set of strict rules and the Holy Spirit guiding your life.

When Paul says, not of the letter, but of the spirit, he is not talking about the purpose of the law, but he is talking about the spirit that God has put in our hearts, the Holy Spirit that guides and teaches us.

[16 : 20] So for the rest of the sermon, we will look at these three points. Point number one is the old covenant and the letter. Point number two is the new covenant and the spirit.

And point number three is the gospel. So let's take a look at this here so we can understand more deeply the covenants that Paul is talking about.

Point one, the old covenant and the letter. We have just discussed that the letter refers to the series of Old Testament laws that are laid down.

When you think of the old covenant and the law in this term, the letter of the law, I want you to think about Moses. When God saved Israel from Egypt, he led them into the wilderness and to Mount Sinai where he descended on the mountain in a cloud.

Moses goes up the mountain and God gives him his laws to bring down to the people. This is called the Mosaic Covenant or the Covenant of Moses because Moses is the representative for the people of God that God makes this old agreement with.

[17 : 41] And with this covenant, he gave them rules and laws and at the heart of these laws are the Ten Commandments. With the Ten Commandments came the threat that if you failed to keep these rules perfectly, you would deserve curses, punishment, and death.

This is the letter of the law that comes with the Old Covenant. The standard of obedience and the threat of death for failure.

I could speak for the rest of the day on different ways that the New Covenant is better than the Old Covenant. It's really a wonderful thing to study and it will make you really appreciate the glories that Christ has brought.

But today we're going to look on just one aspect of why the New Covenant is better than the Old Covenant. If you look at the end of verse 6, Paul writes, for the letter kills, but the Spirit makes alive. The letter of the law kills and that is what makes the Old Covenant less good than the New Covenant. But how does the Old Covenant kill?

[19 : 10] How does that work? Well, the Old Covenant kills in that it shows the standard of righteousness and says, if you fall short of this standard, you will die.

I'm not sure how many of you go on roller coasters, but I happen to enjoy them. I enjoy them. Thankfully, I'm a very tall person, so I've never been denied access to a roller coaster, but you'll all be aware that when you go up to a roller coaster, they've got this stand that says you must be this tall to ride.

What's the height limit? Each one has a different height limit. Each one does. It says, this is the standard. If you fall short, you cannot go in, and if you are above, you're good to go.

The standard does not care how short you fall. Any degree short is a failure of the standard, and you are out. This is what the Old Covenant law does.

[20 : 22] It says, this is what righteousness looks like. This is the standard. You must be this tall to ride. You must be this perfect to get into the presence of God, to get to heaven.

It says that righteousness is always perfectly loving God. It says that righteousness is never lying. It says that righteousness is never taking something that isn't rightfully yours. It says that righteousness is never envying or coveting something someone else has.

It gives a series of lists of what the standard of righteousness is, and it shows you, like, this is what goodness looks like.

And if you fall short of this in any way, you deserve death. And so the letter kills because none of us meet that standard.

[21 : 34] If you were being honest with yourself and you looked at the Ten Commandments, you should be able to admit to yourself that you do not keep those laws perfectly.

This is why the Old Covenant is not as good as the New Covenant, because with it, it shows the righteousness of God, but it cannot make us righteous.

So us as sinners, as criminals, the only thing the law achieves is to proclaim execution. You deserve death and punishment.

that is what the Old Covenant brings. It is either pass or fail and none of us pass, so the letter, when it comes to us, kills.

Point number two, the New Covenant and the Spirit. So what is the difference? Is the New Covenant just a better set of rules?

[22 : 43] that are easier to follow? Is it just someone coming over and knocking down the height gauge a few, you know, so that we can pass? Or that nice guy who you're an inch short and he'll be like, I'll let you in anyway.

You know, is that what the New Covenant is here for? So that the standard's a little bit lower and then we're able to be good enough to get to heaven? No.

It's far, far better than a set of laws and rules that if you follow perfectly you'll get to glory. Even if the laws and the rules of the New Testament were easier, we would still be hopeless.

We are so sinful, so wretched that any set of rules that we have to meet perfectly to be righteous, we would fall short of.

Romans 3 23, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. So why is the New Covenant better? Well, the New Covenant is better because it brings the Spirit, the Holy Spirit.

[23 : 57] I can place a set of demands on you, and I can't force you to obey. I can tell my nephew, you must speak to people this way, you must not talk with your mouth open, you must pull your chair in at the dinner table, you must not yell and scream in public places for no reason.

But no amount of me saying those things will make his heart want to obey. The law is external, but the Spirit is internal.

My sister read to us the passage from Jeremiah 31 where he promises the New Covenant, and in that promise he says, I will put my Spirit within you and teach you to walk in my ways.

The reason why the New Covenant is better is because in the New Covenant, God doesn't just give us external rules that we are hopeless to follow, but he changes our heart so that we want to obey him.

That's one of the things that is superior about the Spirit and the New Covenant to the Old Covenant. Beyond that, the Spirit gives life.

[25 : 26] This is what Paul focuses on here. He says, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, and he says, truly, truly, I say to you, you must be born again.

Nicodemus questions him and says, how can a man be born again? Can I re-enter into my mother as an adult and be birthed again? What are you talking about? And he says, unless you are born of water and of the Spirit.

You shall not inherit eternal life. The Spirit, when received by faith, comes into our dead hearts and breathes life into them.

When we look at our sinfulness, we realize, like Ephesians 2 says, you were dead in your sins and trespasses.

try giving a dead person commands. No amount of laws are ever going to make a dead person be a functional member of society.

[26 : 39] They just sit there and that is what our heart is like apart from the Holy Spirit. God's rules come to us and we are powerless to respond to them.

But when we repent and trust in Christ, he sends his Spirit to us to convict us, as John talks about, of sin and of righteousness and of judgment.

The Spirit enlivens our heart. It moves us from life to death. 2 Corinthians 5.17 If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

Behold, the old has passed away and the new has come. How much greater is it to be a new covenant people who have the Holy Spirit as our guide?

So one of the takeaways we should have is that we must live not by reliance on external rules, on people coming to us and laying out all the things we need to do like a set of laws, but we should live out the Christian faith as people who love to do the things that please God.

[28 : 08] If you have the Spirit within you, you will want to obey Christ. and if there is not an honest, sincere desire in your heart to obey Christ, if you need laws and rules and regulations to make you obey, you should question whether or not you have truly come to believe in these gospel promises, this new covenant.

covenant. I want to touch for a moment and just tie this back to what I was preaching on last week is how our sufficiency comes from God.

We've been given an incredible position as ministers of new covenant promises. Every believer is given the job of preaching the gospel, of living it out in their lives.

And Paul writes that that sufficiency to be ministers of the new covenant comes from God.

And so then we read in verse 6, God who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant. Our calling is not to go out and preach to the world laws and rules to fix their life, to make them better.

[29 : 36] The world does not need ministers of the old covenant who preach laws about you should not smoke, you should not drink, you should not do this and that.

Those things are true. But if all the world gets from our ministry is they live their lives a little bit better, we have failed them.

Because those rules kill people. they are just an external standard that leads to death. So we should be ministers of a new covenant who preach about a spirit who through the gospel brings life out of death, who brings sinners to repentance.

And finally, we want to get to point three, the gospel. Paul writes that the letter kills and then the spirit gives life.

This is the gospel pattern. the gospel is good news, but often when we preach it to people, they don't recognize it as good news, which is why the letter comes first.

[30 : 58] The letter kills and the spirit gives life. So I just got lightheaded really quick right there. the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.

So first, you must realize that you are a sinner to receive the gospel. A common gospel pattern is God, man, Christ, response, where we proclaim the goodness, the righteousness of God, then we proclaim the sinfulness of man.

That's the law. We reveal to people through scripture that they have fallen short of the glory of God and therefore deserve condemnation and judgment.

Then we can get to the spirit giving life. That's Christ. As he comes, he dies on the cross in our stead. So that sinners, guilty sinners who deserve the punishment of the law may go free. and then response, man, when he repents and turns to God in faith, receives the spirit, gains life, is born again, and is taught to walk in God's statutes in this new covenant way.

[32 : 46] testimony. And this is the letter of the law is the reason why the gospel promises work in the first place.

Thank you. the death of the letter, the curses and condemnation that belong to those who fail the law fall on Christ in the gospel.

So when Moses in Deuteronomy 6 says, cursed be everyone who does not obey these words and do everything commanded by them, that curse falls on Christ.

Christ obeyed the law perfectly, but he takes the punishment for lawbreakers so that anyone who believes in Christ might go free.

So in closing, we want to remember our calling as ministers of the new covenant and we want to remember our status as new covenant people, people who live by the spirit, not by the letter.

[34 : 16] We aren't legalists thinking that what we need is to look good on the outside. but we are new covenant people who know it's the heart that matters, a heart that has been brought to life in Christ and brought to obedience.

And we should preach to the world not just of rules, but we should preach to them that they have fallen short of God's glory, that they are dead in their sins and trespasses, and then preach to them the glories of the new covenant we have received and a spirit that gives life to the dead.

Let's close in prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this new covenant that we have started to learn about today in this passage, Lord, and we will continue to learn about in these future weeks. allow us to see our lives in light of this relationship that we would be like the faithful husband or wife who remembers their relationship and takes great care to obey it and to fulfill the vows of their marriage.

Might we fulfill our vows and our obligations to you, you who have done everything for us in giving your son that we might live.

[35 : 46] It is in his name that we pray. Amen.