

September 13, 2020

"Altar-ed Living"

[2 Corinthians 3:1-18](#)

Life is filled with changes . . . changes that are anywhere from minor alterations to major renovations. Some of those changes are connected to our appearance. Hair colors change. Facial hair changes. We make alterations to the homes we live in.

Our sanctuary is undergoing a major renovation, and we've been trying to show some of that over the last few weeks. But still, these are really superficial, surface-level changes. Mostly fun and enjoyable; pretty trivial; not really what the Bible is addressing when it talks about lives being altered to better reflect who God is. And then there are more serious changes, brought on by wildfires and racial unrest.

How about the way our lives have changed during this pandemic? That's not superficial, is it?

Talk about life-altering! The stresses and strains; the uncertainty and unemployment; the isolation and inconvenience. It's putting some over the edge. On the other hand, this new reality has created space and solitude. We have discovered new sanctuaries, or 'altars,' in our living rooms. We have been reminded that we can encounter God in new places of worship (including other churches online or around town . . . with different mask protocols). We have had the privilege of staying more connected than ever with family and special friends. We have discovered our neighbors really do care about us. We have felt more compassion for those who can only see their loved ones through the window of a care center. Our lives have been altered in negative AND positive ways by all this. Change is the one constant . . . in life and in faith.

God's ultimate goal for His children and His world is total transformation; that we would be changed . . . altered. Our transformation happens in many ways and in many places, but some of His most transformative work takes place as we encounter Him in personal and powerful ways AND in "Worship Settings." But "Worship" – it turns out – is not easily defined or neatly packaged and placed. Where and when (and how) God shows up isn't predictable. We can't control what God does, but we can be sure He will accomplish all that He has purposed in our lives, and in His Kingdom. He will **ALTER** us, especially as we encounter Him at the **ALTAR**; those holy places in which we have consciously been in and aware of His presence.

Where have you encountered God? What happened? How were you changed because of it?
How is God changing you in this season of your life?

Paul says that having encounters with the Living God – a God who has, by His Holy Spirit, written His new covenant upon our hearts – causes growth, change, and transformation in our lives. God's presence alters/altars our lives!

The beautiful language Paul uses at the end of this chapter 3 is that He does so with, "with ever-increasing glory." (2 Corinthians 3:18, NIV) Eugene Peterson helps flesh this out a bit in his translation by saying we are "transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like Him." (The Message) For me, the most helpful translation is the NRSV that describes how God's shaping work in our lives happens "from one degree of glory into another." (NRSV)

There's a bunch in here about Moses and the Law, written/chiseled on stone. Paul is very familiar with the law; he was staking his life on it until he encountered Jesus on the Road to Damascus, and had his life altar-ed forever. He's definitely comparing the Law and Moses with the Gospel of Jesus. Clearly, one surpasses the other in its ability to transform lives. But Paul doesn't denigrate the Law. He doesn't communicate, as many have done since his time and to this very day, that the law was or is bad. Paul is not anti-law.

Paul is not asking us to choose a good thing over a bad thing. He actually says that the Law also "came with glory" (2 Corinthians 3:7), but goes on to emphasize that the Law does not lead, in and of itself, to the transforming and life altar-ing work of the Holy Spirit, rooted in the truth and power of the Gospel. It is Christ who "completes/fulfills the Law." Jesus Himself declares in Matthew early in His Sermon on the Mount: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." (Matthew 5:17-18)

There is always this tension to our faith. Where does salvation come from? Does what we do matter, or is it all about what Christ has done?

The way we say it is we are saved "by grace, through faith." We can't earn it. Our right behavior isn't what gets God to notice us and come to the rescue. Paul tells us in the Book of Romans that God was on the move to encounter us long before we got our act together: "But God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) That's the Gospel which Paul says, "has been written on our hearts."

But there is the Law as well, that Jesus holds up and says, 'Pay attention to this too. Don't even think about doing away with it.' There's that tension. Law or Gospel? Gospel, hands down. But the early Church, and every church afterward, has struggled to properly locate the Law of scripture in relation to the center of our faith; Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, we tend to vacillate

between anti-law and a complete disinterest in holiness AND a fixation on the law and strict adherence to the commandments (at least certain commandments and areas of holiness we feel are most important and areas we feel successful in living out).

There's nothing in the Bible that gives us the slightest hint that holiness doesn't matter. But there is plenty in scripture about the dangers of legalism; and Paul addresses it constantly in his letters to the churches. There were Jewish believers in Jesus who just couldn't let go of strict adherence to Jewish law – even for Gentile converts. And this legalism was, in Paul's words, "the letter [that] kills" (2 Corinthians 3:6) and something that "made their minds dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read." (2 Corinthians 3:14)

Earl Palmer explains what happens at the core of faith when a form of legalism (legalistic imbalance is what he calls it) replaces Christ at the center. "What happens is that an individual's confidence and meaning is grounded in himself or herself, and in his or her own proof of piety, which varies from legalism to legalism . . . [Palmer goes on to say people then create their own good news so that] . . . the gospel is not based on Christ's adequacy and His sovereign love, but on human adequacy and proofs of piety . . . The result is a steady erosion of hope." (Earl Palmer in *Alive From The Center: A New Look at 1 & 2 Corinthians*)

Legalism does NOT lead to transformation. It may lead to behavior modification . . . but we are more than Pavlovian dogs and rats. If anything, legalism leads to a loss of hope. "I'm never going to get this right" and "I always blow it" and "I'm so unloveable." Worse than that, legalism leads to an inflated sense of self when we "get it right," a judgmental spirit that others can't catch up with us, and THEN a huge moment of despair when we get it wrong at some point down the road – which will happen eventually.

The Law of God is powerful, don't get me wrong. The words of the prophets need to be heard and applied, for sure. But only in Jesus, the only One who obeyed the Law and the Prophets fully and completely, can we be saved and transformed "from one degree of glory to another." (2 Corinthians 3:18) Make no mistake about it, in Jesus, God wants to meet us face-to-face, at the altars He has established and arranged for us to discover, and change us "from one degree of glory to another."

And who is it that God wants to altar us into? Someone else? Some caricature of a holy roller? No, He wants to transform us into who He already knows us to be. The me I don't yet know exists and was meant to exist when He "knit me together in my mother's womb." (Psalm 139:13)

The great Danish philosopher and Christ-follower, Soren Kierkegaard, answers the question well: "Now, with God's help, I shall become myself."

In the weeks ahead, we will see Abraham become more of himself, and Jacob too. Jacob even gets a new name; he's not just a schemer or deceiver, he's someone who wrestles with God (Israel). They encounter God at some very different altars. Samuel's life will be altar-ed through the faith of his mom, Hannah, who offers him to God through the priest Eli. Elijah is altar-ed at Mt. Carmel, and Isaiah is changed when he stands before a holy God in the temple. Then Jesus arrives on the scene. He's the only human being who didn't need any life alterations. Instead, He came to change everything: a Kingdom, a Temple, and a Church. We'll look at all that this fall.

Oh, and He came to change us too. The Great High Priest wants to meet us at the altar of His choosing? How about we let Him have His way? How about we give Him our hearts, minds, and lives? Let's invite Him to take off the veil, the blinders, the distortions . . . and give us a life-altering, face-to-face encounter.

Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion

1. Where have you encountered God? Can you describe that place (altar)? What happened there? How were you changed because of it?
2. How have you tended to sort out the tension between Law and Gospel? Faith and works? Holiness and grace? What makes it difficult to hold on to the tension between the two?
3. Can you identify a way in your own life in which legalism/legalistic imbalance (of any kind) led to the displacement of Christ at the center? What was the result in your life?
4. How is God changing you in this season of your life? What area of your life do you sense He is altar-ing you?
5. In what ways are you “becoming more of yourself”?
6. What does this passage have to say about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?