

Casting A Good Reflection

A few months ago a good friend gave me a Duranta plant which I immediately adopted into the conglomeration of my other plants. "Mr. Duranta" (as I call him) spent his days in the dining room basking in all the sunlight it could. Recently, on one of our particularly sunny and warm spring days, I noticed Mr. Duranta, although taller than the day I brought him home, looked a bit "shriveled in the leaf." It was watered and located where it could lounge in a reasonable amount of sunlight. I decided to put him outdoors so as to soak up some direct rays. After about eight hours in its new alfresco state it was very apparent that a days' worth of sunlight made a noticeable transformation! It was standing straighter and the leaves had unfolded to match the perfect photos I observed online. I mentioned this eureka moment to the gracious friend who put the plant in my hands, asking them whether this might be a life lesson. They commented, "Yes, spending time in the 'Son' (*italics added*) does wonders for growth." I couldn't have conceived a better thought, and it caused me to immediately ponder the words of a verse that have carried a distinct message for me over many years. In fact, from reading a large number of Christian autobiographies, it is the life's verse of the majority of preachers and theologians from history past to present.

That historically beloved verse is 2 Corinthians 3:18. I memorized it years ago from the Amplified Bible(CE), and it reads thus: "And all of us, as with unveiled face, [because we] continued to behold [in the Word of God] as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are constantly being transformed into His *very own* image in ever increasing splendor *and* from one degree of glory to another; [for this comes] from the Lord [Who is] the Spirit." Now, that verse really presents the process of Christian growth. It presents the process of sanctification, by which a believer is being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. In Romans 8:29 the Apostle Paul tells us what the purpose of God was in saving His people. He says this: "Whom He foreknew, He predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son." The saving purpose of God was to create a redeemed humanity, who would be like His Son.

It is said imitation is the highest form of flattery, and certainly it was true of the Trinity as God made an eternal promise with the Son to create a redeemed humanity who would be made like Him. We were saved to become like Christ. That's why the Bible says "it does not yet appear what we shall be, but when He shall appear, we shall be like Him." That's the goal. That's the purpose of our redemption and is why God saved us; to make us like Christ. And in time, as we await the reality of that, we progressively become more and more like Christ. That's sanctification waiting for glorification. We are ever becoming more and more like Christ. And where is Christ revealed? In His Word. I'm talking about looking into the face of Jesus, which means looking into Scripture, which is the mirror in which the face of Jesus is revealed to us, manifesting the glory of God.

In this verse we are told that as we gaze at the glory of the Lord; specifically as we behold in the Word of God, like a reflecting mirror, we are transformed by the Holy Spirit from one level of glory into the very same image. In other words, the Holy Spirit is ever-increasingly making us like Christ. This is sanctification. This is the goal of Christian living. The great Princeton theologian Charles Hodge put it very helpfully. He says, "Sanctification does not consist exclusively in a series of a new kind of acts, it is the making the tree good in order that the fruit may be good. It involves an essential change of character. Just as regeneration is a new birth, a new creation, a quickening, or a communicating a new life; so sanctification in its essential nature is not holy acts, but such a change in the state of the soul that sinful acts become more infrequent, and holy acts more and more habitual and controlling."

More than any other single verse, 2 Corinthians 3:18 shows how believers move into Christlikeness. There is no question that this is the objective of our life; we are all to come to "the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ," according to Ephesians 4. Paul writing to the Galatians in 4:19 said, "I am in birth pains until Christ is fully formed in you." He said to the Colossians that "We teach every man in order that we may present every man perfect." In other words, "We want to bring every one of you as close to the very image of Christ as we can." That's the goal of Christian living, and that's what the verse is teaching. God, by His Spirit, moves us toward Christlikeness, taking us from one level of glory to the next, to the next, and so on.

When we talk about looking into the face of Jesus Christ and seeing the glory of God, I'm not advocating a vision; I'm not telling you there's some mystical, intuitive, esoteric method in which you can perceive Christ on a spiritual level. I'm talking about looking into the Word of God, reading and understanding that truth about Jesus Christ which makes

God known to us, and God being made known to us equips us to be what he wants us to be. It is simply to say there is an objective look at the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ as He is revealed on the pages of Scripture. That is why the Bible, and the New Testament in particular, is called the Word of Christ and why we are to let it dwell in us richly. Richly! (cf. Col. 3:16)

Our text, 2 Corinthians 3:18 doesn't say, "Beholding we transform ourselves," but rather, "Beholding we are being transformed." By whom are we being transformed? By the God who is at work within us. That's why the author of Hebrews prays in Hebrews 13:20-21 that great benediction: "Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ."

Our verse goes on to say that this "transformation" comes from "the Lord [Who is] the Spirit." The great theologian Charles Hodge states it this way: "The Spirit opens the eyes to see the glory of Christ, to see that He is God manifest in the flesh, to discern not only His divine perfections, but His love to us, and His suitableness in all respects as our Savior." Hodge goes on to say: "This apprehension of Christ is transforming. The soul is thereby changed into His image from glory to glory by the Spirit of our Lord. This apprehension of Christ is transforming." The English theologian John Owen summarizes this teaching so beautifully in his book *The Glory of Christ*. It was the last work he wrote as he was getting ready to behold the glory of Christ face to face. Toward the end of that work he writes, "Let us live in the constant contemplation of the glory of Christ, and virtue will proceed from Him to repair all our decays, to renew a right spirit within us, and to cause us to abound in all duties of obedience. It will fix the soul unto that object, which is suited to give it delight, complacency, and satisfaction."

Beholding, we are transformed. Now the implications of that for the practical pursuit of Christlikeness are staggering. This teaches us that in all of our diligent efforts to appropriate the means of grace that the Spirit uses to accomplish His work of sanctification, the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ stands at the very center of them, giving life to all of them. In everything that we do to press further in sanctification – reading our Bibles every morning, praying to God, fellowshiping with other believers, attending to the ordinances of the church, regularly participating in the baptism and the communion of Christ's saints, laboring and striving to keep God's commandments; in all of them our fundamental number one goal is to saturate the eyes of our heart with the all-satisfying vision of the glory of God revealed in the face of Christ. In my Bible reading, in my prayer, in my fellowship with you, in my worship, in my desires to obey, I'm after Jesus. I'm after seeing and enjoying more of Him, and because I'm beholding, I'm being transformed.

Let me give you a few ways in which Scripture transforms us by gazing into it.

1. 1 Peter 2:1-3: "Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander, like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord." It is by the pure milk of the Word of God that the people of God grow with respect to salvation, that we grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Word is the means by which we grow, because the Word is the means by which Christ is revealed.
2. Matthew 4, Luke 4: Scripture is sufficient for battling temptation. In both these narratives, Jesus battled against the temptation of Satan by turning to Scripture. It's like a refrain in the text: "It is written. It is written. It is written." Jesus battles Satan himself in the most intense temptation of His life up until that point by unsheathing the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. If Scripture was sufficient for Jesus to battle temptation, it is sufficient for us to battle temptation. Jesus was a master swordsman with the Word.
3. Psalm 119:9-11: Scripture is sufficient for fighting sin. "How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word." Psalm 119:11, "Your word I have treasured in my heart, so that I might not sin against You." A heart that's full of the truth won't easily be enticed by error. The heart that is full and satisfied by the glory of Christ won't be easily lured by the luster of sin. And, don't forget to include verse 11 – our approach to battling sin cannot be a half-hearted attempt!
4. Acts 20:32: Scripture is sufficient for the edification of the people of God. In this text, Paul is giving his

farewell address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, and he knows that these are going to be the final words that he says to his friends, and he brings his remarks to a climax in verse 32. He says, “And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

5. Psalm 119:105: A truth that is much maligned in our day: Scripture is sufficient to give us guidance and understanding as we navigate the uncertainties of life. So many belittle the sufficiency of Scripture because they believe it doesn't speak to the particulars of life. They say, “I need that extra word from God because I need to know who to marry; I need to know which school to attend. ”Psalm 119:105 says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” It guides. God's Word shows me the way I am to take, not by giving you principles. Psalm 119:130, “The unfolding of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.” The Word gives light and understanding to the simple. Psalm 119:99, “I have more insight than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation.” Scripture might not tell you how to change the oil in your car, and it may not tell you which university to attend or which person to marry, but it enlightens the mind to understand divine truth. It trains the mind in divine wisdom. It gives us principles of holiness and wisdom, so that when we do have to make those decisions that are not explicitly spelled out in Scripture, we make them with understanding, with prudence, with insight.

6. Psalm 119:50: Scripture is sufficient to sustain us through trials. “This is my comfort in my affliction, that Your Word has revived me.” Later in verse 143, the psalmist says, “Trouble and anguish have come upon me, yet Your commandments are my delight.” Even when I'm facing trouble and anguish, the trouble and anguish that I'm promised to face as a stranger and alien in this sinful world that hates me, the Word of God sustains my heart. I take delight in Your Word even while I'm suffering.

7. 2Timothy 3:16-17: Scripture is sufficient to equip us for every good work. “All Scripture is inspired by God” – breathed out by God – “and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” Christian, do you need to be taught? God gave us Scripture for teaching. Do you need to be reprovved or corrected? God gave us Scripture for that. Do you need to be trained in righteousness and practical holiness? Scripture is profitable for that, too. Do you need to be made complete? That's the very purpose, the very “so that” for which God has given us this inspired and profitable Scripture. That term “complete” is the Greek term *'artios'*. Some translations have “adequate,” “perfect,” “complete.” It means to be capable. It means to be proficient. It means to be equipped to meet the demands placed on you, to be fully outfitted for the task.

Well, that's the short list, but I trust you found them helpful and perhaps the next time you look at a plant as I did, you will truly find that spending time in the 'Son' does wonders for growth.