

2 Corinthians 2:14–3:18

Prove Yourself

TSC, 2 Corinthians: God's Power in Broken Vessels

MPT: God turns our weakness and inadequacy into the fragrance and glory of Christ, revealing through us the transforming power of the Spirit that replaces the fading glory of self-reliance with the lasting glory of heart renewal in Christ.

MPS: God delights to turn broken vessels into living billboards of his glory—spreading the fragrance of Christ and revealing his Spirit's transforming power.

UFN: We're all tired of feeling like we have to prove ourselves: to God through religion and to others through performance or approval—but everything we build that way eventually fades. What we need is a glory that doesn't depend on us and therefore never fades: the transforming glory that comes from Christ through his Spirit (the New Covenant!).

2 Corinthians 2–3

INTRODUCTION

Take a look at this picture: *What do you think they all have in common?*

- **Maya Angelou:** author, poet ... integral part of the Civil Rights Movement alongside figures like MLK and Malcom X
- **Tom Hanks:** One of the most accomplished, well-liked, and successful actors in Hollywood history // Woody. Forrest.
- **Michelle Obama:** Historic First Lady of the United States
- **Andre 3000:** One of the greatest rappers to ever grace the mic as part of one of the greatest rap duos of all time: Outkast

Arguably four of the most accomplished, influential, memorable, and loved human beings in their own right, yet listen to these quotes:

- **Maya Angelou:** “I’ve written 11 books, but each time I think, ‘Uh oh, they’re going to find out now.’”
- **Tom Hanks:** “When are they going to discover that I am, in fact, a fraud and take everything away from me?”
- **Michelle Obama:** “That feeling that you shouldn’t take me that seriously [never goes away]. What do I know?”
- **Andre 3000:** “I never totally dedicated myself to anything [because] I’ve always been a jack-of-no-trades ... [I’ve always been] less than everybody else.”

Four of the most **successful** and **lauded** people in history, yet they, along with a slew of others, all deal with the oh-so-familiar **imposter syndrome**.

- Which begs the question: **If people at the “top” feel like frauds, what does that say about the rest of us constantly trying to climb?**

- (PIC DOWN)

Who here has ever dealt with some measure of imposter syndrome? The reason imposter syndrome hits so hard is because deep down, we're all running the exact same race ... the race to:

- Prove we're **competent**.
- Prove we're **not falling behind**.
- Prove we're **worth it**.
- Prove we're **spiritual enough**.
 - The race to prove we belong.

That pressure to prove isn't just a "career" thing either ... no, it bleeds into our **relationships**, our **parenting**, and even our **walk with God** to the point that we end up **exhausted**, not necessarily from what we *did* this week, but from the role we felt we had to play:

- You didn't just go to work... you tried to **justify** your spot in the room or seat at the table like everyone was gonna rate each other immediately after the meeting.
 - *Wondering: Have I proven I belong?*
- Student: You didn't just show up to class... you managed your reputation like every hallway was a comment section—people grading your outfit, mood, lunch table, presentation.
 - *Wondering: Have I proven I'm worth noticing?*
- You didn't just parent this week... you carried the pressure to **never drop a ball**: breakfast, school, drop-off, lunches, groceries, errands, pickup, dinner, doctors appointments, all while making sure your kids don't look feral and are brushing their teeth and bathing at least a few times per week ... all while someone yells MOM or CAN I HAVE A SNACK every 14 seconds.
 - *Yet still wondering: Have I done enough to prove I'm a good mom?*
- How many of you know the feeling of wearing yourself out trying to silence that inner critic who tells you, "You're not enough ... so PROVE it"?

That's exactly the struggle Paul steps into in our passage today in 2 Corinthians. When he writes to the church at Corinth, he's not weighing in on some **distant theological dispute** ... he's speaking straight into this same pressure we feel.

CONTEXT

Even though Paul planted this church (back in Acts 18), since he's been gone, the church had been introduced to some **new Christian leaders** who were **way more impressive** than Paul: folks who were better preachers, they were wealthier than Paul, they were more put together ... **So some of**

these Corinthians are like, “Why should we listen to Paul? He’s not **impressive**, he’s basically **poor**, he’s constantly **suffering**, his ministry doesn’t look **successful**, he’s not **powerful** in any meaningful way.” **Translation: “PAUL, PROVE YOURSELF.”**

Instead of **defending his resume** or **flexing his credentials**, Paul decides to turn their **criticism** into a **classroom**. He uses this as a teaching moment to show them how **God delights in turning broken, weak, inadequate vessels into living billboards of his redemption, grace, and glory.**

- Instead of jumping on the hamster wheel of **proving himself for others**, he’s gonna show them a **different way to live.**

WALKTHROUGH

Look at how he does it: **2 Corinthians 2,** ¹⁴**But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.**

Paul says God leads us in a **triumphal procession**—a **victory parade**. In Paul’s day, the Romans would throw these **massive parades** after a **military conquest**. The commanders would march down the streets with all of their new spoils on display.

- It was a giant **“LOOK HOW AWESOME WE ARE”** parade.
- Paul says, *“Just like those Roman triumph parades, it’s God who, in Christ, gives us victory over the devil and our sin.”*

But instead of a parade, the way God **spreads word of this conquering gospel victory** is **through us**. When you hear the **gospel message**—the message of how God sent his Son to die for your sin, but then rose three days later to prove victory (triumph!) over sin and death, and now if you place your faith in Jesus you are found *in Christ*, gaining access to eternal life, favor, and relationship with God, and sharing in the victory Christ secured—when you place your faith in Jesus and are transformed by that truth, God now uses you to **spread the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.**

- **Let me translate that for you: GOD WANTS TO USE YOU.**
- That’s why Paul continues in v. 15, ¹⁵**For we are the aroma of Christ**—in the Old Testament, they’d **offer burnt sacrifices** to God, which were “pleasing aromas.” But now, in Christ, and because of *his* sacrifice, **we are the pleasing aroma to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing,** ¹⁶**to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.**
- During these Roman parades they’d be **spraying perfume** and **waving incense** everywhere—to the victors, that smelled sweet, but to the captives, it was the smell of defeat.
- It’s the same way with the gospel:
 - To **Christians**, the gospel is a reminder of the **wonder of salvation**: **a fragrance from LIFE TO LIFE**
 - To **non-Christians**, the gospel is a reminder of **terror and divine judgment**: **a fragrance from DEATH TO DEATH**

Then, look what Paul says next: **Who is sufficient for these things?** In other words, *who in the world feels **qualified, righteous, or gifted enough** to carry the **weight** and **responsibility** of spreading the gospel?! Who actually feels adequate for THAT?*

- **If I'm honest, even as a pastor, I don't.** And **neither do you**—I know that cuz almost every single **membership interview** I do, when I ask how you want to grow more as a disciple of Jesus, 99 percent of you say, *"I want to grow in evangelism."*
- Paul asks this rhetorical question to emphasize the gravity and responsibility of spreading the gospel ... that, left to our own human ability, we are deeply insufficient for the task. WE ALL FALL SHORT.
- **UNLESS ... God steps in to help.**

That's why Paul says in v. 17: **¹⁷For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word** (we don't preach for profit or hustle spiritual goods), **but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.** He says, *"We spread the gospel because God **calls** us, God **sees** us, and Christ **empowers** us."*... Which is the whole theme of this series: God's power shows up precisely in weak, cracked, broken human vessels like us.

Paul ends chapter 2 by saying he refuses to play the game—he's not out here trying to **prove** himself ... he's not **performing**; he's not **selling a version** of himself to win people over.

- In other words, Paul steps *off* the **treadmill of self-validation**.

And now, as we move into chapter 3, he's gonna show us **why we so easily find ourselves getting back on it**. Paul pulls back the curtain and exposes **three ways we fall back into a "prove yourself" life**:

1. We carry a pressure we can't hold.
2. We chase a glory we can't keep.
3. We attempt a change we can't create.

Three ways we exhaust ourselves trying to do what only Christ can ... and he starts with where most of us live:

1) The Pressure We Can't Carry (3:1–6)

Resumes: try to make ourselves sound really important ...

- **Pro Shop**
 - *Utilized tee sheet demand management and supplied generation strategies* → I scheduled tee times
 - *Handled escalated member/guest service issues in a prompt and effective manner* → I dealt with obnoxiously drunk golfers
- **Pastor J.D.'s Weekend Associate**

- *Provided leadership and oversight of vital backstage areas* → Stocked Mt. Dew's for Pastor J.D. and handed him mints after he preached
- **Used to have people come drop off their resume:**
 - *Handled financial transactions for a multi-billion-dollar corporation* → Bro, you were a cashier at McDonalds

We work so hard to sound impressive because **deep down, we're terrified that who we *actually are* won't be enough.** So we load ourselves with this **pressure to prove** ...

That's why Paul opens **chapter 3** by naming the instinct we all have: ¹**Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?** (*Do I need to prove myself?*) **Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?** The early church couldn't call or email one another recommendations, so when an "unknown" Christian or preacher came around, they'd carry **letters of recommendation** to prove they were legit.¹ And Paul's like, "You want ME to have a rec letter?!": ²**You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.** Lest they forget, Paul is the one who started THEIR church! Paul's like, "Look in the mirror. Look around at your congregation. This church wouldn't even exist if I hadn't started it. YOU YOURSELVES are my letter of recommendation!" ³**And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.**

From here through the rest of chapter 3, Paul's gonna take us to the **deep end of the pool**, alright? It's **adult swim** time—no kids in the pool. Fret not, I'm a **certified theological lifeguard** ... grab your noodles and goggles, let's go ...

In v. 3, Paul introduces the **stone tablets**. In **Exodus 24**, God called Moses up the mountain where he established the **old covenant** by giving him **tablets of stone** with the law and commandments written on them. It was God giving Israel a holy, perfect standard written on stone tablets, ultimately revealing what God required of his people.

- The old covenant was like God handing Israel a **packing list** as they embarked on this journey of following him. **However, while the old covenant was holy and good**, and the tablets of stone showed them **what God required**, it could never **give them the power to do it** ... they couldn't follow the law in their own strengths cuz **the law was powerless to actually change anyone's heart.**

What Paul does is contrast those old covenant stone tablets with the **new covenant** promised by **Jeremiah and Ezekiel**:

- In **Jeremiah 31:33** and **Ezekiel 11:19–20**, we read about a new covenant God says he's gonna make with his people ... one where he'll put his law not *on* tablets of stone, but "*in his people*" as he "*writes it on their hearts.*"
- Which is why Paul says in v. 3 it was written **not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts** ... cuz only then will God's people **be able to follow his decrees and be careful to keep his laws** (a new covenant promise from later on in Ezekiel 36).

¹ See Acts 18:27 ... or the entire book of Philemon!

- In Christ (who fulfilled the new covenant promises), God didn't just **raise the standard**; he **supplied the power to live it** by sending the Spirit to live inside of every person who confesses Jesus as Savior.

But here's the irony: Even with all that new covenant power, a lot of us still walk around like we're **dragging the old stone tablets** as we try to follow God. We live like we're under the **old list**, when God has already given us a **new heart**.

Recently traveled with our entire family ...

- Bags meticulously packed via Mom's checklist ...
- **Aviyah: *Why is this bag so heavy?!***
 - Her 5-year-old brother: Action figures. Lovies. ROCKS.
 - He had filled it with everything *not* on the checklist which, listen, **caused his sister to carry a weight she was never meant to carry.**
- **She was carrying a weight *someone else* created for her.**

Then it hit me: **WE DO THE EXACT SAME THING**. We carry around:

- **The weight of expectations**: feeling like you have to be the perfect parent, perfect spouse, perfect Christian, perfect leader.
- **The weight of comparison and image management**: curating how you appear so no one can see the cracks ... scrolling through social media thinking everyone else is doing better, holier, more disciplined, more successful.
- **The weight of religious performance**: thinking God is disappointed unless you're crushing Bible reading, prayer, evangelism, and spiritual disciplines every day.
- **The weight of past mistakes**: dragging shame you were never meant to carry into every new season.

And these weights—these pressures—crush us cuz they were never supposed to be ours to carry!

- Under the old covenant, **proving yourself** was the whole system!
 - The standard was holy perfection, but it was impossible to bear. That's why Israel kept buckling under it.
- But the good news of the gospel is that God has given us a new **heart** and a new **Spirit** *through* a new **COVENANT!** One built not on *your* performance but on *his* power!

The tragedy is that you and I constantly drift back to the old covenant, stuffing our lives with the old weights and pressures of proving ourselves—trying to impress God, trying to measure up—**and we end up carrying a pressure the gospel has already lifted.**

- **Let me ask you: *Where are you carrying a weight you're no longer meant to carry?***
- Whatever that weight is for you—expectations, comparison, performance—that pressure isn't from God.

Listen to how Paul speaks to that burden in v. 4: ⁴Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. ⁵Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, ⁶who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Paul's whole point is this: **the Christian life was never meant to run on your own power.** Everything God calls you to as a “**minister of a new covenant**,” he supplies you for. We don't ever minister *for* God out of our *own* strength ... we minister out of God's strength *through* us.

- Pastor and author **Vance Havner** said it best: **“Our efficiency without God's sufficiency is only a deficiency.”**
- Holy Spirit power doesn't flow through **self-reliance**; it flows through **surrender**. The most **empowered** Christians aren't the most gifted or most efficient; they're the most **submitted**. Because it's in **your submission** that God can fill you with **his sufficiency**.

And that's exactly why the new covenant is so much greater—because it's **powered by God**, not **pressured by you**.

- In the new covenant, **God doesn't pressure you to produce what only he can provide!**

That's the first way we slip back into a “prove yourself” life—by carrying a pressure we were never designed to hold. But Paul says that pressure always leads to the second trap: **chasing a glory we can't keep.**

2) The Glory We Can't Keep (3:7–11)

To make his point stick here, Paul reaches back to one of Israel's most iconic moments of glory: ⁷Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone (old covenant), **came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end,** ⁸**will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?**

This is another reference back to **Exodus 34**, when Moses came down from meeting with God and his face was **literally glowing from God's glory**—so bright the people can't even look at him, so he ends up covering it with a veil.

- His face was like one of those **glow-in-the-dark toys** you had as a kid. They'd **absorb light** and then **shine it back out** when the lights were off—the longer it absorbed the light, the brighter it glowed.
- But also, the longer it was **away** from the light source, the more the glow faded.
- And Paul says **that same fading pattern** shows up anytime we try to create our own glory.

⁹For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation (old covenant), **the ministry of righteousness** (new covenant) **must far exceed it in glory.**

¹⁰Indeed, in this case, **what once had glory** (old covenant) **has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it** (in the new covenant). ¹¹For if **what was being brought to an end came with glory** (old covenant), **much more will what is permanent have glory** (new covenant).

In other words, if the fading glory really was *real* (which it was), **imagine how incredible the glory that never fades is!** Comparing the old covenant glory with new covenant glory is like comparing the **flashlight on my iPhone** with the **glory of the Sun!**—they both produce light, but one of them pales in comparison to the other.

And what Paul is saying is **that's what self-produced glory is like today**—it's like a puny phone flashlight compared to the glory of the Sun!

He's trying to show us the insufficiency of the old covenant “prove yourself” way of life while simultaneously pointing us to the new covenant glory that's not only greater but also doesn't **depend on our performance**.

- Imagine a **confidence** that isn't **tied to your best week**.
- Imagine a **transformation** that isn't **built on your ability to keep pulling yourself up by your bootstraps and proving yourself**.

See, you might be able to create “glory” for a little while, but if it **runs on your own strength**, it will eventually run out.

- You can try to keep **people impressed with you**, but the glory fades the moment someone's opinion shifts.
- You try to keep your **kids convinced you're a strong, put-together parent**, but the glory fades the moment life gets chaotic (which is every night as you try to put them down).
- You can feel the **warm glow of God's presence when things are going well** ... but the moment you hit a rough week, or miss a few days, or fall back into an old habit/sin, the glow and glory fades.

If you **manufactured** the glory, you have to **maintain** it—and the reality is, you can't.

- Your **effort** and **consistency** and **impressiveness** might produce a temporary shine, but it's not a glory you can keep. Because the only way to keep it is to **pile on more pressure**, which **sends you right back into the first ditch of proving yourself**.

That's the second way we drift back into the “prove yourself” life:

1. We carry a pressure we can't hold.
2. We chase a glory we can't keep.
3. We attempt a change we can't create.

3) The Transformation We Can't Create (3:12–18)

Paul has been making one point so far: Any change you try to build on your own will always feel like pressure and eventually fade. So now he turns the corner and shows you the only glory that *doesn't* fade ... because it's the only glory that transforms you from the inside out.

¹²Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, (We're not bold cuz we're impressive but because we have a hope that doesn't fade) We're bold, he says, ¹³not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. ¹⁴But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. (Again, under the old covenant, people could see the glow ... but not the God behind the glow. Their hearts were still covered.) ¹⁵Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. (If you can hear the gospel and read the Bible and still not see Jesus, there's a veil over your heart.) ¹⁶But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. (Friends, that's the **experience of salvation in one sentence** right there → Turn to Jesus and the veil is removed. Sight restored. Glory revealed. Transformation begins.) ¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

- Freedom from **performing** for God.
- Freedom from **proving yourself** to others.
- Freedom from your **past ... shame ... sins**.
- Freedom from the **old list**, the **old pressure**, the **old covenant**...

Then Paul gives one of the most stunning truths in the Bible: ¹⁸And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed (it's not a transformation we can create) into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Oh, I need you to see this ... cuz if you could understand this, it would radically change the way you relate to God and the Christian life!

- Transformation doesn't just come from **trying harder** ... it comes from **looking longer**.

CONCLUSION

Alright, I'm about to show you some pictures that I probably shouldn't ... and I'm likely gonna regret it later on. But they perfectly illustrate what Paul is talking about in v. 18, so I'm **sacrificing my dignity for your sanctification**. You're welcome.

Growing up, I went through ... *phases*. And each phase matched **whoever I was trying to impress** or **whatever group I was orbiting at the time** (you know exactly what I'm talking about, cuz you went through the same thing).

- Eastbay Magazine, Nike, match your BFF phase: Me + DAP
- Athlete/Celebrity Phase: **Will Smith, Griffey Jr., Iverson**,
- Athlete ... but introduced to hard rock: rock athlete
- total HS bro phase // golf phase // tattoo phase

- Seminary phase: **nerd seminary** → **cool seminary**
- Wifed up: Married **man who listens to his wife phase**

Listen, I didn't wake up each morning and say, "You know what? I'm gonna reinvent myself today." Nobody gave me a 10-step plan to change my personality or style.

- In every season of life, whatever or whoever **captured my gaze** ended up **ultimately shaping my life**.
- **I would start to BEHOLD something, and would eventually BECOME like them.**

That's not just a "dude in a phase" problem ... that's a human heart reality: **What you behold, you eventually become.**

- Whatever **captures your gaze** will ultimately **shape your life**.
- Whatever you **fix your focus on** will begin **forming your character**.
- Whatever you **behold**, you eventually **become**.

Which means, listen:

- If you **behold** people's approval, you **become** a slave to their opinions.
- If you **behold** comparison, you **become** insecure.
- If you **behold** control, you **become** anxious.
- If you **behold** self-reliance, you **become** self-condemned from all the ways you don't measure up.

But man, if you behold Jesus?

- You become **secure** in his love demonstrated for you on the cross.
- You become **settled** in his acceptance.
- You become **restful** and at **peace** in his sovereignty, knowing he holds what you can't.
- Behold Jesus and you become **transformed**—slowly, steadily, one degree at a time.

But you gotta keep it in that order: Behold, *then* become! We can't fall back into old covenant patterns of thinking it's:

- *Perform and become.*
- *Fix yourself, prove yourself, try harder, and be transformed.*
 - That's the old covenant talking.

The new covenant says: Stop striving. Lift your eyes. Behold Jesus.

- Fix your gaze on his **beauty**, his **mercy**, his **grace**, his **finished work**.

- Your life doesn't transform by proving yourself ... you *get* transformed by trusting, receiving, and beholding the One who already proved everything for you.

Church: BEHOLD Jesus and become like him.

- Turn to him and the veil will be removed, and the Spirit will begin a transformation in you that you could never create for yourself.
- Let the gospel free you from needing to prove yourself, because in Christ you're already approved.

PRAY

I pray we stop trying to prove ourselves ... stop trying to earn what's already been given ...
Start beholding *you* as you transform us ...

*Father,
What we know not, teach us;
What we are not, make us;
What we have not, give us.*