

We Are Ministers Of A New Covenant

2 Corinthians 3:1-18

Key Verse: 3:6

“He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant--not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

Today's passage teaches how we became ministers of a new covenant (1-6). It also teaches us how glorious our ministry is, and what blessings we have received (7-16, 18-19). When we realize that we are ministers of a new covenant, we can have a healthy conviction that sustains us even in a crisis. May God grant us this conviction in our hearts today.

I. You are a letter from Christ (1-6)

First, you yourselves are our letter (1-3). Look at verse 1. "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?" With these words Paul touched a problem in his relationship to the Corinthians. They had been influenced by false apostles who emphasized letters of recommendation as proof of valid apostleship. These false teachers disparaged Paul for not having such letters, planting doubt about his integrity and message. To help the Corinthians, Paul produced the best recommendation letter. Look at verse 2. "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody." The Corinthians were in Paul's heart. He loved them, prayed for them, worried over them, and always thought of them, like a father does his children.

Look at verse 3. "You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." It was self-evident and undeniable that the Corinthians were a letter from Christ. The Holy Spirit had forgiven their sins, healed their wounds, given them new hope, and transformed their lives, printing the image of Christ on them. Only Christ could do this. It happened through Paul's ministry. Instead of looking to some distant authority for validation, Paul points to the image of Christ in them and says, "You are a letter from Christ, written by the Holy Spirit."

A letter from Christ is superior to any human letter. Human letters of recommendation can be helpful in entering a university, getting a good job, and so on. To help foreign delegates obtain U.S. visas to attend the Purdue Conference, we needed letters from senators. These really worked, especially from senators in

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the Foreign Relations Committee. However, these letters are temporal; after new senators are elected, they will be useless. Even letters on stone do not last forever. However, letters from the Spirit, written on human hearts, are eternal. They are most trustworthy.

Some people think that to do the work of God we need a certificate from a seminary, and that without this we can do nothing. However, Paul put no confidence in these things (Php 3:4-6). All that mattered to Paul was that the Holy Spirit had worked through faith in Christ Jesus. To Paul, that was the one and only criteria that validated God's servants. In Christian history many seemingly uneducated people, like Jesus' apostles, were used greatly by God through their faith in Christ. Charles Spurgeon was converted to Christ in 1850 at the age of 16. At age 17, he began to pastor a country church. At age 19, he began to preach at one of the oldest established churches in London. London society was ready to devour him, because he was a country boy with no education. But as he preached, the Holy Spirit worked and people began to repent and believe in Christ. This church grew continuously from 200 to 10,000 members. Spurgeon's influence spread all over England and the world. One of his biographers said that his success was due first and foremost to "the power of the Holy Spirit."¹ This does not mean that education, including seminary education, is unnecessary. It means that we need a recommendation letter from God, not from men. Last Friday, at the Loop Fellowship meeting, Amber Calovi confessed that Christ has worked in her through Whitney Koch's Bible teaching ministry. Whitney did not go to seminary. In fact, in college she studied accounting, not theology. Yet when she believed and taught the Bible by faith, the Holy Spirit worked in Amber's heart. This is one of many letters from Christ in our midst.

Second, our confidence and competence come from God (4-6). Look at verse 4. "Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God." Paul's confidence was not relative, but absolute. It was different from confidence in human authority. Paul's confidence was unshakable, as God is unshakable. This kind of confidence was necessary for Paul, for it enabled him to endure challenges. God gives us this kind of confidence. Look at verse 5. "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God." The word "competence" is also translated as "sufficient" (KJV), "adequate" (NAS), or "capable" (TEV). God gives us everything we need to do his work. It is not inherent; it is given by God. So it is not only a few special people who can do God's work. Whoever trusts in God can be made competent by God to be a gospel worker.

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Verse 6 says, "He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant--not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Paul says that God has made "us"--all believers--competent as ministers of a new covenant. The new covenant is derived from the old covenant. The old covenant was between God and the Israelites. It was a conditional covenant based on deeds (See Ex 19-24). When the Israelites obeyed the law, they received its blessing. When they disobeyed, they broke the covenant and suffered its curses. The new covenant is different. With deep understanding for man's weakness, God made the new covenant based on his mercy. God saves men simply through faith in Jesus. God knows that we cannot keep the old covenant. The new covenant is a covenant of grace. It is one-sided and unconditional. Jeremiah 31:31-34, say in part, "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel...I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts...they will all know me...For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

The new covenant became effective when Jesus died on the cross. At the Last Supper, Jesus said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Mt 26:28). In the old covenant man's sin was forgiven through the shedding of animal blood. This provision was temporary and incomplete. The Israelites had to offer sacrifices again and again, whenever they sinned. This was only a shadow of the good things that were coming. The new covenant is not based on animal's blood, but on the blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. The blood of Jesus Christ was holy and sinless. So it can bring complete and eternal forgiveness once for all (Heb 9:12). When we come to God by faith, God forgives our terrible sins and purifies us through Jesus' blood (1 Jn 1:9). We don't need to cleanse ourselves before going to God. When we come to God as we are, depending on his grace, Jesus purifies us with his blood. Jesus gives us eternal life (Ro 6:23b). This is the character of the new covenant.

Look at verse 6b. "...not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." This tells us how we become the ministers of a new covenant. Here "the letter" refers to the written code, which is God's law. When Paul says, "the letter kills," it is an abbreviated explanation of the law. The law, given by God, is sacred, holy and righteous. The problem is that man is weak and cannot keep the law with his own strength. Romans chapter 7 reveals Paul's spiritual struggle. He made great effort to keep the law as a Pharisee, to the point that he was faultless. So he should have been filled with the joy of righteousness. Instead, he felt bound by shackles of sin all the more as he struggled more to obey the law. He learned one thing: the law exposes sin; however, it cannot save man from sin. Rather, the law judges sin and brings the death sentence. The law does not kill

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man; sin kills man. The power of sin made Paul unable to do good, though he had the desire to do so. The power of sin made him a slave of sin. He cried out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" In such a desperate moment he looked at Jesus who was hung on the cross for our sins. Then he shouted, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" In Romans 8:1-2 he says: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death." When we accept Jesus as our Savior, we cross over from the power of sin and death into the power of the Spirit of life. When we are in Christ Jesus the power of the Spirit of life sets us free from the power of sin and death, and we receive a new life. This is how we become ministers of a new covenant.

We who believe in Jesus are all ministers of a new covenant. God wants to save all people through us. Wherever we go, we are God's ministers of life, not instruments of condemnation. Wherever we go, there is life-giving work. Those who are dying in their sins will be made alive when they hear the gospel. Today Missionary Monica Barry is holding her first worship service in Alpine, Texas. May God bless her gospel message and give life to the dying souls of people there. Spiritually speaking, all people without Christ are dying in their sins. Only the gospel can give them life. May God use each of us as a minister of the new covenant to give life to the dying souls on all of the Chicago area campuses in this fall semester. May God raise and send 100,000 ministers of the new covenant to all nations by 2041.

II. The glorious ministry of the new covenant (7-18)

Verses 7-16 show that the glory of the new covenant far surpasses the glory of the old covenant. Verses 17-18 teach us what kind of blessings we receive in the new covenant.

First, the surpassing glory of the new covenant (7-16). The ministry of the old covenant was glorious. It taught former Israelite slaves the law of God. It revealed that sin was their real problem, how to deal with sin, and how to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. As Moses received the law of God, his face became radiant with divine glory (7). We need the law. This generation is becoming amoral, following the previous immoral generation. Amoral people do not suffer from guilt because they have no concept of sin. They consider homosexual behavior as normal. We need the law to recognize sin as sin--the fatal disease that destroys people and society. Dying souls need to know that sin is their real problem. They need the law to expose and judge their sin. However, this can be called a ministry of death.

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If the ministry that brings death is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that gives life? (7,8) People consider the medical profession most noble because it saves life--physical life. How much more noble is the ministry that saves man's eternal soul! Though there are many kinds of work, nothing is more glorious than the ministry that saves souls from perishing.

Look at verse 9. "If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!" The old covenant is a ministry that condemns. It finds faults and passes sentence like a prosecutor. It always accuses without mercy. No one can be free from its accusations. Condemned people feel crushed, and without hope. So some people end their lives. However, the new covenant brings righteousness. It never accuses or condemns us. It points us to Christ who took all our sins on himself at the cross. Through Christ, we are forgiven, encouraged and strengthened to live as God's children. We are right with God. We are made alive and grow. The ministry that brings righteousness is more glorious than the ministry that condemns (Jn 8:11).

Verses 10-11 show that the glory of the old covenant is temporary but the glory of the new covenant is everlasting. The glory of the old covenant is like moonlight that brightens a dark sky during the night. Moonlight disappears when the sun rises. John wrote, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn 1:17). Just as sunlight surpasses moonlight, the glory of the new covenant surpasses that of the old covenant. Verses 12-13 tell us that the ministers of the new covenant are even more glorious than Moses. To hide the fading glory of the old covenant, Moses put a veil over his face. The surpassing glory of the new covenant lasts forever. So ministers of the new covenant are bold. They can go around with unveiled faces and reveal the unfading glory of the new covenant. Still, there are many who want to cling to the glory of the old covenant. They try hard to obey the law. Yet they always fail. Then a veil of guilt and condemnation block their hearts. This is removed when we turn to the Lord. Verse 16 says, "But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away." Then we can enjoy the glorious ministry of the new covenant.

The glory of the new covenant surpasses every other kind of glory. There are many people in glorious positions: presidents of nations, Nobel prize winning academics, army generals, premier athletes, movie stars, and so on. However, they cannot save souls, even their own. They cannot make men right with God. Furthermore, their glory is fading away like cut flowers in a vase. On the other hand, the ministry of the new covenant forgives men's sins, saves their souls and leads them to eternal

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life in the kingdom of God. So it is most glorious. God's grace to us overflows! Not only does God save us, he also gives us the most glorious ministry. We should have humble conviction that we are ministers of a new covenant, and we are glorious.

Second, the blessings of the new covenant (17-18). Look at verse 17. "Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." Jesus gives us true freedom. There are many things that bind us. Strongest among them is the binding of a guilty conscience. If a man commits sin, it is the beginning of a degenerative process that continues long after the act is over. He suffers from a guilty conscience for the rest of his life. The guilty conscience does not disappear as time goes by. One German sailor killed a woman who tried to call the police while he was robbing her house. He avoided prosecution by the law. However he suffered endlessly from his guilty conscience. After 27 years of such suffering, he turned himself in to the police. No one can bear the burden of guilt. A guilty conscience makes man crazy. Jesus gives us true freedom from guilt. Jesus also sets us free from the fear of death. Because man is destined to die, he suffers from anxiety, distress, emptiness and fear. But Jesus saves us from the fear of death and enables us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness, before him all our days (Lk 1:75). God gives us true freedom through Jesus Christ our Lord. God enables us to serve him, not reluctantly out of obligation, but willingly and joyfully out of love for Jesus. Thank God!

Look at verse 18. "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." When we come to Christ we not only enjoy true freedom, we are also being transformed into Christ's likeness with ever-increasing glory. In contrast to Moses' fading glory, we have ever-increasing glory. We are being made more like Jesus every day. When Jesus comes again, we will be like Jesus: imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual. Wow! What a glorious hope we have! Thank God who gives us a glorious hope in our hearts.

God forgave all our sins and made us ministers of the new covenant through Jesus. We are not qualified, but we became ministers of the new covenant by the grace of God. This ministry gives life to perishing souls. This ministry forgives condemned sinners and makes them right with God. So our ministry is the most glorious work in the world, more glorious than any other. We must be proud of this as ministers of the new covenant and we must be bold in carrying out this life-giving work.