**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.”

We’ve seen in 1 and 2 Corinthians that Paul deals with some very ugly problems in the church: divisions, immorality, pride and showing off, the spread of rumors and accusations. But in addressing these, Paul never becomes ugly himself. On the contrary, somehow, he always leads us to a higher plane where we can see a very glorious spiritual reality. That continues to be the case in today’s passage. In the face of shameful attempts to discredit him, Paul gives us a glimpse of the true heavenly glory of the gospel ministry and how amazingly equipped we are for it, because of Jesus. Let’s pray that when we look at our ministry and ourselves, we may see beyond the earthly difficulties and human weaknesses, seeing the glory we share as ministers of a new covenant.

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

As we have seen, in this letter of 2 Corinthians Paul has to really go to bat for his ministry, defending it against all sorts of attacks. At the end of last week’s passage, we saw that, though his plans sometimes had to be changed and not everything he did looked like a success, nonetheless Paul called his ministry a “triumphal procession”—that is, a victory parade. It was because of the innate power of the gospel. Paul said that wherever he went, he was spreading the aroma of Christ, which is the fragrance of life to those who are being saved.

As we start Chapter 3, Paul says, *“Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?”* After defending his ministry, he knew people would accuse him of boasting and tooting his own horn. Then he says, *“Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?”* In those times, the same as today, letters or recommendation were used to establish the credentials and legitimacy of people in many areas of business. I’m sure many of the traveling preachers and so-called gurus, who Paul said were peddling the word of God for profit, carried recommendation letters that praised them with glowing language. It doesn’t mean that such letters are always bad or unnecessary. In 1 Corinthians, we saw Paul himself mentioning the use of such letters in 1 Corinthians when sending the relief offering to Jerusalem.

But did Paul need to pony up a new letter of recommendation to re-establish the legitimacy of his ministry? He shouldn’t have to, at least not to the Corinthians. He had a kind of letter with a much more powerful testimony than any letter written by a human on paper. Look at verse 2. *“You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone.”* What does it mean that the people Paul is writing to were themselves a letter? It means that the Corinthian believers’ transformed lives were the fully sufficient testimony and proof that his ministry was legitimate. Anyone who visited the church in Corinth would say, “Wow, some great power really changed these people.” That’s the most convincing kind of letter, which is open for anyone to read and can never be forged or faked.

It’s obvious that what gives any letter of recommendation its authority is who it is from. The greater the achievements or credentials or fame of the person who wrote the letter, the more weight the letter carries. People always try to get letters of recommendation from the most accomplished person they know. Given my own career trajectory, I have quite a bit of experience with recommendation letters, so I’ll tell you one story. In my first attempt at getting a PhD, I tried to do research with one of the most famous professors in the Computer Science department (not famous like a celebrity that everybody knows about, but famous among computer scientists for scientific achievements.) I utterly failed to accomplish anything with him, and later I was kicked out of the program. But nonetheless, a few years later when I was trying to start again and get into a new PhD program, I still wrote to that famous professor asking him for a letter of recommendation. I knew that even if what he had to say was not totally positive, a letter from someone this respected would make people sit up and pay attention to my application. Well, that’s the end of the story, because of course, he declined (very politely declined) to write a letter for me. The point is, the higher rank a person has, the more their weight their recommendation carries. When Paul says that the Corinthians themselves were a letter, who was that letter from? 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.”* The letters of the Corinthians’ changed lives were from Jesus Christ himself, who has the highest rank of all, sitting at the right hand of God. And these letters were written not in ink but by the Holy Spirit who came in and changed sinners’ hearts. In fact, every believer—including each of us—is a letter from Jesus for the world to read. Look at your neighbor. However little or much you may know about them, aren’t they an amazing letter to read? This was all the evidence Paul needed to be confident that God himself approved of his ministry.

Paul is not saying this to show off. In verse 5 he says, *“Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.”* Paul is not defending his ministry so urgently because he wants to be recognized as somebody great. He is merely an instrument. But the Corinthian believers needed to be confident that the work of God that took place among them through Paul’s ministry was real. The real problem Paul is addressing is that some of the believers were forgetting the grace of God in their own lives. When they got overly impressed by human credentials, they started listening to all kinds of empty talkers, and even forgot that they themselves were the fruit of Paul’s labor in the Lord. If this continued, Paul knew that they would surely be led astray by crafty false teachers who appealed to their pride.

This point Paul is making here about qualifications is very applicable to our ministry. UBF from the beginning has been primarily a layperson ministry, meaning that most of us don’t have a seminary degree or ordination from a well-known denomination. Many of our missionaries went to the mission field and began the work of making Jesus’ disciples with very little formal training. But God accepted these gospel workers’ life offering and has changed lives through our ministry in over 90 countries. Sometimes, we can be tempted to look at other churches and worry that we are missing out on something because our church doesn’t have all the services and programs and rituals or the name recognition of bigger churches. But in fact, we are not missing anything. We don’t have anything to be ashamed of and we don’t need to feel inferior in any way to churches with more official credentials, because the changed lives themselves are the credentials, the letter from Christ to the world, written on our very own hearts.

Therefore, when we gospel workers carry out our ministry, we should be just as confident as Paul was. Look at verse 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.”* Have you ever been asked to do a job that you knew you were not competent to do? It’s a very scary feeling. Psychologists today even came up with a term for just that feeling—they call it “impostor syndrome.” But in the gospel work, we never have to suffer from impostor syndrome, because God himself makes us competent, not with a competence that comes from ourselves, but by the Holy Spirit who works through our faith. It’s a well-known saying, attested by many examples in the Bible, that God does not call the qualified, he qualifies the called.

We’re not saying that all official credentials are meaningless, or that knowledge can’t help us as Bible teachers—it can. But at the same time, it is not the true power source of ministry. So let’s remember that the power of grace that changed our lives didn’t originate in human credentials, and let’s be confident that God will use us effectively in the same life-giving ministry.

II. The Glorious Ministry of the New Covenant (7-18)

When Paul says in verse 6 that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,” he is talking about more than just the matter of credentials. He is pointing out the great difference between the gospel and all law-based religion. Many of the people who were coming into the churches after Paul and trying to discredit him were what we call “Judaizers”; they were trying to tell the Gentile believers that they had to keep the law of Moses in order to be saved. Paul knew this was very wrong. So Paul uses the example of Moses himself to show how limited the ministry of Moses was, and how glorious the gospel ministry is by comparison. Look at verses 7-8. *“Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?”*

Here, Paul is referring to events recorded in the book of Exodus, events which defined the very essence the Jewish nation’s identity and religion. After leading the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, Moses led them into the wilderness and then he went up mount Sinai to receive God’s words for the people. He received the Ten Commandments, which were engraved on stone tablets by the finger of God. There were actually two times on the mountain for Moses, which we don’t have time to describe in detail. But at the end of the second time, which lasted forty days, something amazing happened. As Moses came back down the mountain carrying the tablets, his face was radiant—it was actually shining. Moses was somehow reflecting the glory of God that he had absorbed while in God’s presence on the mountain. (Ex 34:29-30) This was a sign of the glory of the covenant that God was making with his people.

God’s covenant, that is, his agreement with the people of Israel to be their God, was conditional on them keeping these words of the Law, the Ten Commandments. But, again to make a long story short, Israel failed to keep this covenant of Law. Of course, God knew they would fail. As Paul describes extensively in the book of Romans and Galatians, the purpose of the law was to show people like us that we are sinners who are not able to please a holy God. The law God gave is holy and righteous and good, but what it can’t do is give sinful people the power to obey it. Because the old covenant of law resulted in condemnation for those who were under it, Paul called it “the ministry that brought death.” This is what he means when he says “the letter kills”.

But later, in Israel’s history, God sent prophets who promised that a new covenant would be given. It may have been expressed most clearly by Jeremiah, who said, *“‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,’ declares the Lord.”* (Jer 31:31-32)

That new covenant is the gospel of Jesus. As we know, the night before he died, Jesus told his disciples, *“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”* (Lk 22:20) In verse 9, Paul calls this new covenant ministry “the ministry that brings righteousness,” clearly stating that the new covenant does what the law could never do. Jeremiah also described how this new covenant would work*: “ ‘This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time’ declares the Lord. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, “Know the Lord,” because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,’ declares the Lord. ‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”*

When Jesus died on the cross, he took away all the Law’s power of condemnation, because he was the perfect sacrifice under the law for all our sin. Obtaining full forgiveness for us, he set us free. Then he rose from the dead and sat down at the right hand of God. From there, he could send us the Holy Spirit, who is God living within us to give us a totally new source of life. That’s why the new covenant ministry is called the ministry of the Spirit. The Spirit makes us new on the inside, not merely so we can observe the law’s prohibitions, but he gives power so we can live with a new kind of freedom and vitality to please God. That’s why the new covenant ministry is much more glorious.

Interestingly, Paul makes it a point to say that the old covenant ministry was also glorious in its own way. Even though it brought condemnation, God’s glory was revealed in it. Moses’ face was shining, after all. But it can’t even stand a comparison to the glory of the new covenant. In verse 10 he says, *“For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory.”* The glory of the old covenant was always meant to pass away. The radiance of Moses’ face faded away after a little while, like how one of those glow sticks you snap only lasts a few hours. This is a symbol of how the old covenant ministry was not the permanent one. In verse 11 Paul says that its glory was “transitory”. The new covenant exceeds the old one in every way; its glory is surpassing glory.

Paul explains all this so we can have confidence in the life-giving power of gospel ministry and not be distracted at all by people who make legalistic demands based on their own standard. Look at verse 12. *“Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.”* Thankfully, nobody has recently come around to our church to try to make us obey the law of Moses. But we still have to be careful—careful that we don’t slide back into trying to please God by keeping some commands outwardly with our own strength. That’s is like going back to the old covenant, like going back under the letter that kills.

Paul also calls attention to one more aspect of Moses’ story. Whenever Moses came out from God’s presence with a radiant face, he covered it with a veil. Verse 13 says Moses did this *“to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was fading away.”* Paul interprets this veil spiritually, saying there is still a kind of veil today. He says that when people remain in their own righteousness, they are the unable to see the glory of God, and it’s like a veil is still covering their hearts and dulling their minds. (14-15) But the good news is that *“whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.”* (16) Moses revealed the glory of God a little, but Jesus revealed it fully. If Moses was shining like a 60-watt light bulb, Jesus shines like the sun.

Seeing God’s glory is everything to us; just getting a sense of God’s greatness is far better than getting something for ourselves. If we turn to Jesus, our spiritual eyes will be opened and we will be able to see God’s glory in Jesus, especially in his death and resurrection. What is more, the more time we spend with Jesus, contemplating his glory, the more we come to resemble him. Look at the last verse, verse 18: *“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”* We ourselves can shine just like Moses did, not in a visible way that fades away, but in a spiritual way that gets brighter and brighter as we grow and are filled with the glory of Jesus. That’s the real work of the Spirit in new covenant ministry.

Today we have seen how much greater the gospel ministry is than any law-based system, because it has the power to bring righteousness. Let’s remember that we can have confidence in carrying out this new covenant ministry. May God bless you to experience freedom when the veil is taken away in Jesus. May God bless us all to grow together to have the fulness of life in the Spirit.