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 us how we became the ministers of the new covenant (1-6). It also teaches us how glorious our ministry is and what blessings we have received (7-16, 18-19). Through today’s passage we must think about who we are: the ministers of a new covenant and learn how glorious our ministry is. We can find a conviction about the ministry we are doing.

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?” Why did Paul say this? At that time, there were some teachers who confused the Corinthian believers. They claimed that only they were qualified to teach others because they received letters of commendation from the Jerusalem church. They claimed that Paul was not qualified to teach others because he had no recommendation letter. In this way they planted doubt about Paul’s integrity, and also his message. However, Paul had a different recommendation letter. Look at verse 2. “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody.” The Corinthian believers themselves were the very letter of recommendation that proved Paul was a servant of Christ. These letters of recommendation are different from other recommendation letters because they are not private, but public—known and read by everybody. Also, it was written on Paul’s heart, not on paper. This means that Paul knew the Corinthians very deeply through his personal shepherding. They were the spiritual fruits that came from God when God blessed Paul’s ministry. So spiritual fruit is the most trustworthy letter of recommendation which is genuine and has credibility.

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.” In this verse Paul talks about the characteristics of this letter. The Corinthian themselves are a letter from Christ, the result of Paul’s ministry. This letter is 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 written with ink rested on the human authority of the one who signed the letter. However, the letter written by the Spirit of the living God rests on God’s authority. The letters written with ink, and even letters written on stone, will disappear as time goes by. But the letters of Christ written on human hearts are everlasting because they are written by the Spirit of the living God. As long as God is living, it lasts. Since God is everlasting, it lasts forever. Therefore this letter is most trustworthy.

Usually people like to have letters of recommendation to enter a university or to get a good job or to get a USA visa. To invite foreign delegates to the Purdue International Conference we needed recommendation letters from the Senators. We found that letters from Senators on the foreign relations committee, especially Senator Voinovich from Ohio, really worked well. However, after new senators are elected, these letters will not be useful any longer. Recommendation letters are important because they prove the trustworthiness of the person for whom they are written. That is why people want to receive letters of recommendation from people who are highly honored by men. Some people think that to do the work of God we need a recommendation letter or certificate from a seminary. They think that those who do not graduate from a seminary are not qualified to become gospel workers. However, even if someone has a Ph.D. in theology he cannot be a true gospel worker unless he has a letter or recommendation from God. Great men of God in human history are all those who struggle hard to get letters of recommendation from God rather than men. For example, Charles Spurgeon did not receive any formal theological education. But he started his ministry at the age of 17. He became a great man of God who led many people to Christ. D.L. Moody’s education was limited to elementary school. But he sought to please God in every way through his ministry in Chicago. He grew to become a great preacher who led many people to Christ. This does not mean that education, including seminary education, is unnecessary. It means that we need a recommendation letter from God, not from men. When we have letters of recommendation from God we can serve God without trying to obtain the approval of others.

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 different in nature than the confidence that comes from human recommendation letters, which are not absolutely certain. Paul’s confidence was absolute and certain because it came through Christ. This kind of confidence was necessary for Paul. When he had this confidence he could endure all kinds of hardship. Also, we need this kind of confidence to do the work of God. We need not only this kind of confidence, but also competence which comes from God. Look at verses 5-6. “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. 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.” Here the word competence in verse 5 is also translated as “sufficient” (KJV), “adequate” (NAS), or “capable” (TEV). God not only qualifies us to be gospel workers but also gives us everything, such as ability and qualification to do God’s work. This ability is not something inherent to Paul; it is given by God. God enabled him to do God’s work. God is the source of his ability. Here we learn that it is not only a few special people who can do God’s work, but anyone who trusts God can be made competent by God.

What has God made us competent to do? 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.” In verse 6 “the letter” is the law of the Old Testament. “The Spirit” means the Holy Spirit. Since there is a new covenant, there was also an old covenant. The new covenant is derived from the old covenant. The old covenant was between God and the Israelites. The new covenant is between God and the new Israel. The character of the old covenant is revealed in Exodus chapters 19-24. When they obeyed God they became God’s people and God became their God. It was a mutual contract. It was a conditional covenant based on deeds. If one party did not keep the covenant it would be broken. So when the Israelites disobeyed God it was cancelled. But the new covenant is totally different. The new covenant was given by God who understands deeply the weakness of man. He made the new covenant based on his mercy. So God promised to save men as long as he believes in Jesus because he knows that man has no ability to keep the covenant. So the new covenant is the covenant of grace. It is unconditional. We can find the origin of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34, which says 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…I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” The new covenant was fulfilled when Jesus shed his blood on the cross. Luke 22:20 tells us that when Jesus took the cup at the last Supper he said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” In the old covenant man’s sin was also forgiven through the shedding of animal’s blood. But the effect was temporary and incomplete. They had to offer sacrifices again and again whenever they sinned. This was only a shadow of the good things that are 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). So whenever we come to God by faith, God forgives any kinds of terrible sins and purifies us through the precious blood of Jesus (1 Jn 1:7,9). So we don’t need to wash ourselves before going to God. When we come to God as we are, depending on the precious blood of Jesus, then Jesus purifies us with his blood. 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 verse shows how we become ministers of the new covenant. Here “the letter” refers to the written code, which is God’s law. Actually, the letter itself does not kill people. The law was given by God. Therefore, it is sacred and holy and righteous. The problem is that man is weak and cannot keep the law with his own strength. Romans 7 shows Paul’s spiritual struggle. He made great effort to keep the law as a Pharisee, to the point that he was faultless. Then he should be filled with the joy of salvation. But he found that he was bound by shackles of sin all the more as he struggled to obey the law more. Through this he found one thing: the law helps man to find himself as a sinner. But it cannot save man from his sins. Through the law, when we realize that we are sinners, we suffer from it and die because of our sin. Therefore, the law does not kill man, but sin does. Through this Paul realized that he has desire to do what was good, but he had no power to carry it out because of the power of sin in him. The power of sin made him a slave of sin against his desire and he could not get out of it. So 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 explains the reason for this: “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.” So 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. That is how we became the ministers of a new covenant. We are ministers of a new covenant. God wants to save all people through us. So wherever we go we should be God’s ministers to give life, not instruments of condemnation. Wherever gospel workers 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.  We could see clearly through the Purdue Conference that there is a life-giving work where missionaries go. People are dying in their sins. Only the gospel can give them life. May God send 100,000 missionaries to all nations by 2041.

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

Verses 7-11 show the glorious ministry of the new covenant in comparison to the old covenant. Verses 12-18 talk about the blessing of the new covenant.

First, the surpassing glory of the new covenant (7-11). The ministry of the old covenant was glorious. In what sense was it glorious? The Israelites had lived as slaves in Egypt for 430 years under the power of Pharaoh. Then they came out of Egypt by God’s mighty power. But there was a problem. Their bodies came out of Egypt but their minds and lifestyles were those of slaves. They were emotional and materialistic and adulterous and greedy and full of complaints. They lived gratifying the cravings of their sinful nature following its desires and thoughts (Eph 2:3). They were by nature objects of wrath. They were impatient. They complained even when they faced a little trouble. In one word they needed law. When they did not have the law, they lived like animals in ignorance. That’s why God gave them the law. The purpose of giving them the law was to help them to realize their sin and find themselves as sinners and realize the need of salvation. Also, the law was given to them to train them as God’s people to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Because of the law the Israelites could be disciplined and comparatively righteous with regard to other Gentile nations. In this respect the law that was given to them was glorious.

We also need the law. This generation is becoming more and more amoral, following the immoral generation. In an immoral generation people suffer from a guilty conscience when they sin. But in an amoral generation, people sin without experiencing guilt because they do not acknowledge sin as sin. The Samaritan woman who had married five times was considered a great sinner in her times. But in these times she is regarded as an able woman who could get what she wanted. In these times people even admire such a woman. Many regard homosexuality simply as an alternative lifestyle. The homosexual movement is gaining power day by day. To these kinds of people, the law is absolutely necessary. The law will help them to realize that they are sinners and that they absolutely need God’s salvation. In that sense the ministry of the law is glorious. This ministry was so glorious that people could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of his glory (7).

Then if the ministry that brings death is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that gives life? In what ways is the ministry of the Spirit glorious? The ministry of the Spirit is glorious because it gives life to those who are perishing. So we can say that the ministry of the Spirit is the ministry of life. People consider medical doctors as of the most noble profession because it saves life. If the ministry that saves man’s physical life is noble, how much more noble is the ministry that saves man’s soul. Though there are many kinds of work, nothing is more glorious than the ministry that saves men’s souls from perishing. We are given such a glorious ministry.

Look at verse 9. “If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!” The ministry that condemns finds faults and passes sentence based on their faults like a prosecutor. It always accuses without mercy. No one can be free from its accusations. When we are condemned through accusations we feel crushed, and without any hope at all. This is why many people commit suicide. But the ministry of a new covenant brings righteousness. It never accuses us or condemns us. It always embraces all our weaknesses and encourages us to live by faith because God already paid all the requirements of the law through Jesus Christ. So in the ministry of the new covenant, anyone who accepts can be made alive and grow. So the ministry that brings righteous is more glorious. For example, the law condemned a woman caught in the act of adultery. But Jesus freed her from condemnation and gave her a new life by saying, “Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.”

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. But the moonlight disappears when the sun rises. The moonlight is only a reflected light, but the sunlight is original light. So Jesus came into the world as the light of the world, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Just as sunlight surpasses moonlight the glory of the new covenant surpasses that of the old covenant. There are many glorious positions in the world. In the army, thousands of soldiers go and come according to the command of army generals. It shows the glorious position of a general. The president of a nation is also glorious. That is why many politicians want to be president at any cost. These days the eyes of the world are on athletes who won gold medals at the Olympic Games. But even though there are many glorious positions, these kinds of positions cannot save even one soul. They cannot make men righteous before God. The glory of such positions is fading away like the glory of flowers in the field. But the ministry of the new covenant is most glorious because it saves men’s souls and forgives their sins and finally leads them to eternal life and the eternal kingdom of God. Thank God who not only saves us but also gives us such a glorious ministry. We should have a humble conviction that we are ministers of the new covenant.

Second, the blessings of the new covenant (12-18). Verses 12-13 tell us that the ministers of the new covenant are not like Moses. Because the old covenant had fading glory, Moses put a veil over his face to hide this fading glory. But the surpassing glory of the new covenant is lasts forever. So ministers of the new covenant are bold. Moses put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. Moses did so because he saw the danger that people would not obey the law if they saw the limitation of the law. But even these days the Israelites do not know the limitation of the law. They think that they can be saved when they keep the law. But they always failed to obey the law. So they suffered from a guilty conscience and a sense of condemnation. Such a thing can be removed when a man turns to the Lord. Verse 14b and 16 say, “It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.” Whenever anyone turns to the Lord, he or she can enjoy freedom from their guilty conscience and sense of condemnation.

Look at verse 17. “Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” This verse shows us that only Jesus can give us true freedom. There are many things that bind us in our lives. But nothing is stronger than the binding of a guilty conscience. If a man sins it does not end in sinning. He suffers from a guilty conscience for the rest of his life. The guilty conscience does not disappear as time goes by. One sailor in Germany killed a woman when she tried to call the police while he was robbing her house. After the event he suffered a lot from his guilty conscience. Finally after 27 years he turned himself in to the police because he could not bear the burden of guilty conscience anymore. In this way a guilty conscience makes man crazy. No one can bear such a burden. But Jesus gives us true freedom from a guilty conscience. 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). Thank God who gives us true freedom through Jesus Christ our Lord and enables us to serve him, not reluctantly out of obligation, but willingly and joyfully out of love for Jesus.

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, but also we are being transformed into Christ’s likeness with ever-increasing glory. This means we are being sanctified. This sanctification goes on until we are glorified on the day of Jesus’ coming again. When Jesus comes again, we will be like Jesus. We will be raised imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual like Jesus. 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. 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 bold in carrying out this lifegiving work.