

(2 Corinthians) ch.1:20-3:4

by Zac Poonen

God's promises are yes in Christ, and we must forgive others to prevent Satan from taking advantage of us.

Duration: 44:17

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, 1 Corinthians 3:1, 2 Corinthians 1:24, 2 Corinthians 2:17 - 3:1, 2 Corinthians 3:5-6

Topics: "Ministry Life", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the inner life of the Apostle Paul and his ministry. Paul emphasizes the importance of working together with others and not ministering alone. He acknowledges that God leads him in triumph in Christ, regardless of the circumstances he faces. The speaker also highlights the need for a ministry of the spirit, where the truth of God is not just intellectually understood but also burns in the hearts of believers. Additionally, the sermon emphasizes the importance of forgiveness and welcoming back those who have repented, drawing parallels to the story of the prodigal son.

Transcript

Let's turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 21. He has spoken about the promises of God in verse 20 that we considered in our last study, which in Christ Jesus are yes. In other words, Christ has put a signature to the promises of God.

And by Christ we add our signature also, our Amen, verse 20, so that those promises can be ours for the glory of God. It is for the glory of God that all His promises are given. We must bear that in mind also.

Very often we think of God's promises as just for our own convenience. Many people are trying to claim God's promises for their own convenience and they missed out a very important phrase in verse 20, that it is to the glory of God. There is no promise that God gives us that Jesus Christ has put a signature to, which is merely for our convenience.

When Peter once sought Christ's convenience by saying to Him in Matthew 16, Lord, you will not go to the cross, Jesus turned around and called that the voice of Satan. Get behind me, Satan, because you are interested in man's interests, not God's interests. Man's interests are our own convenience.

God's interested in His glory and our character. And so the promises of God are meant for His glory, for our character, not for our convenience. And this is the reason why many people go astray trying to claim God's promises, not for the glory of God, but for their own convenience.

So that is a very beautiful verse that we can profitably meditate on. Every phrase in it has value. As many as may be the promises of God, and there are many of them, in Christ they are yes.

It's only in Christ. We can't claim those promises that we ourselves are outside of Christ. And by Him we have to add our signature of Amen, and we seek the glory of God, those promises become ours.

Now it says here, He who has established us with you in Christ is God, and who has anointed us is God. There are two things that God has done for us. One, He has established us, placed us as belonging to Christ, given us our position in Christ, given us a secure, stable position through union with Christ, and also anointed us with the Holy Spirit.

Praise God that God does both these things for us. He establishes us in Christ and anoints us with the Holy Spirit. This is God's will for every Christian, that he be established in Christ and anointed with the Holy Spirit, just like Jesus Himself was secure in the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit, and He has given us an example.

Verse 22, He goes on to expand on that second part of the anointing and calls it also the sealing. He has sealed us or stamped us with His seal and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge. He has given us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge, means a sort of a security deposit, a sort of a first installment of what He is going to give us much more in the future.

That is the meaning of that phrase, a down payment, a guarantee that the rest will also come. Just like when we make a down payment for something, for a house, we will never just leave it and forsake it. That means we are really interested in that house.

You wouldn't pay 50,000 rupees down payment for a house if you are not planning to buy the house. You will forfeit the deposit. And that is a very beautiful phrase there.

It is called a down payment in the margin. And the fact that God has put His Spirit in our hearts indicates that He has already made the down payment on our purchase and we are going to be His completely. He will complete it, the redemption of our body in the day that Jesus comes again in glory.

Then He goes on to say and explain why He could not come to Corinth. Earlier on He was speaking about that. He says when I said yes, I didn't mean no.

Neither did I plan as a human being so that I had to cancel my plans later on. But He says I call God as a witness to my soul. In other words, He says I am not just trying to find a convenient excuse for not coming.

That would have been human cunning, worldly shrewdness that we plan to do something for someone and tell them so or we plan to visit someone and tell them so. And then when we don't do it or don't go, we try to find some convenient excuse to cover up the reason why we didn't go. Because we are all basically diplomatic as the children of Adam.

But Paul had cleansed himself of all that human diplomacy and that human shrewdness and he had a testimony that he was sincere, verse 12. And he says now I'll tell you the real reason why I couldn't come. The honest truth.

I don't have to invent any convenient reason. He says God is my witness. I call God as a witness against my own soul in case I'm telling a lie.

That the reason I did not come was to spare you. Because he said if I had come, I would have had to really discipline you people there quite severely. Because you had gone off from the truth.

You had allowed that man who was living in adultery to continue in the church and so much strife and quarreling and all types of things in your midst and you hadn't set those things right and I would have had to use a rod on you as he had said earlier in 1 Corinthians 4. But to spare you, he says, I felt perhaps I shouldn't come to Corinth. I delayed my coming so that you'd set things right first. He says this doesn't mean that we lord it over your faith.

This doesn't mean that we're sort of dictators and tyrants domineering over you and your faith. Far from it. He says we are workers with you for your joy.

He says the only reason why we speak in such words of discipline, etc. is so that we can help you to achieve happiness. Paul is saying what I wrote in my first letter was to help you to achieve happiness so that you'd set those things right in Corinth.

As servants of God, we're never to lord it over other people. Domineering over other people is absolutely unworthy of anyone who calls himself a servant of God. No, Paul did not lord it over others.

He was a servant. He goes on to explain that later on in chapter 4 that we preach ourselves as servants, not as lords. We do not lord it over your faith.

We have no desire to force ourselves upon you. But we are workers with you. We work with you so that you can be truly happy.

Because it is only in your own faith that you can stand firm. You can't stand firm in my faith, Paul says. My faith will help me to stand firm.

But if you want to stand firm, you must have your own faith. And he says your faith, in your faith, you are standing firm. Because the Corinthians had acted on Paul's first letter and they had set matters right.

And he says I can see that your hold on the faith is secure enough. You stand on your own feet in your faith. There is no need for you to lean upon us and on our faith.

No. But he says in chapter 2, verse 1, I determined this, that I would not come again to you in heaviness, in sorrow. I didn't want to visit you in grief and have an unpleasant time there of discipline while I'm there.

And that's why he says I wrote. And that is the first letter to the Corinthians. And you know he had to write some straight things to them.

Not with any diplomacy. He says you can understand exactly what I meant when I wrote that letter. He says I didn't want to come and cause sorrow to you.

For he says if I cause you sorrow, who then makes me glad? But the one whom I've made sorrowful. He says what point is there in my depressing the very people who can give me such joy. He says I get such joy through fellowship with you.

There we see something of Paul's humility. He had joy in the Lord. But he also had joy through these weak baby Christians in Corinth.

He wasn't proud thinking that he could fellowship only with spiritually minded great apostles. He could fellowship with ordinary babes in Corinth and enjoy their fellowship. And he says you make me glad.

Then how can I make you sorrowful when you're the ones who make me glad. And so he says I wrote as I did for this reason. This is the reason why I wrote like this.

Lest when I come I should have sorrow. Instead of you making me happy, you would make me sorrowful. And that's why I wrote so strongly to you.

Paul's explaining the reason why he wrote that first letter in such strong terms. He says there's no double meaning in it. It's exactly what I wrote.

2 Corinthians 1.13 I spoke in sincerity. Not to domineer over your faith, but to help you to be more happy. 2 Corinthians 1.24 And so that when I come there, since you would have said all matters right, you'd make me happy instead of making me full of sorrow.

And now he says having confidence in you all, that my joy would be the joy of all of you. My joy depends on all of you he says. And that what made me happy would make you happy also.

And that's why he wrote. And he says I didn't write it without tears. It's out of much affliction and anguish.

I wrote to you with many tears. He says the many tears I shed as I wrote to you in deep distress with a heart of anguish. Not in order to make you sorrowful, but so that you might know my love for you.

Paul knew that they could be happy only if they were pure. And there he was a true father to the Corinthians, writing to them that which was for their good, even if it caused them sorrow, so that they would be holy and thus happy. We turn today to 2 Corinthians 2.4 Paul is explaining here in these opening verses of chapter 2 the reason why he wrote that first letter, the first letter to the Corinthians in such strong language and also how he wrote it.

He says he wrote that in order that they might set things right in Corinth, in the church there, before Paul actually arrived in Corinth, so that his time there would be one of joy and not one of discipline and sorrow. But he says I didn't write to you without any feeling in my heart. Sometimes we can write strong words to other people without any feeling in our heart.

Paul was not like that, even where somebody else was wrong. He says I wrote it to you with many tears. I shed many a tear as I wrote that letter to you.

There was affliction and anguish in his own heart when he saw the sad state of the church in Corinth. When we see the sad state of some of our fellow believers, it's easy to rebuke them without any feeling of sorrow in our own heart or anguish. That would show that we are teachers, not fathers.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4 you can have 10,000 teachers, but you don't have many fathers. A father feels an anguish when he sees his son going astray. A teacher does not feel that same anguish when he sees one of his students going astray.

Many preachers are like teachers, not fathers. There are not many fathers, even in the whole world, spiritual fathers. But a true father can be seen in the way he rebukes people when they go astray.

Jeremiah was a prophet who rebuked Israel for over 40 years, but he shed many tears in sorrow in secret for them. And Paul was like that in the footsteps of Jeremiah in the New Testament. He says, I shed many a tear when I wrote that letter.

Do you sense that when you read 1 Corinthians? You may read 1 Corinthians and think that Paul wrote that with a hard spirit, but it wasn't true. The Spirit of God saw that. He says, God is witness to my soul, 2 Corinthians 1.23. He wrote with many tears, so that you might know the love which I have for you.

Love doesn't mean you cover up the truth and be a diplomat. You speak the truth, you rebuke. Jesus himself says, as many as I love, I rebuke.

And rebuke and correction is a part of love. A true father will always do that for his children, but it will also cause sorrow to the father's heart that he has to correct his children. And he says further in verse 5, if anyone has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree, in order not to say too much, to all of you.

He says it's not me that's hurt, the behavior of this person who did not conduct himself in a godly way in Corinth. It's not that it's caused me distress. Not that he has injured me in some way, but that to some extent, now he says I don't want to exaggerate, but he has injured all of you.

That's true, because that man had ruined the testimony of the whole church in Corinth. And he says that's what I'm concerned about. He says not that my testimony as an apostle is spoiled because my products are not so good.

He says I'm not bothered about my testimony. I'm concerned that he has hurt all of you. Right? You have acted on my first letter and you have punished him by putting him out of the church.

They did that. We see that from verse 6. That they did act on Paul's letter and they punished him. And now they were in danger of going to the other extreme.

See, man has a constant tendency to swing like a pendulum from one extreme to the other. When we read the first letter to the Corinthians, we find that the people in Corinth had tolerated adultery in their midst and strife and lawsuits in court and all types of things. And they were talking about grace and we have to love one another and accept one another.

And all types of sin was going on in their midst. That was one extreme. When they got Paul's letter rebuking and correcting all these wrongs, they swung like the pendulum to the other extreme and pushed this man who had committed adultery right out of the church, which was all right.

But then when the man had repented and turned from his sin, they were not even willing to take him back. That was another extreme. To be so hard.

In Jesus, the glory of God was seen, we read in John 1, 14, full of grace and truth. There's a balance. To stand up for the truth and never to compromise and at the same time to be gracious.

Just like in our body, we have bones, but the bones are covered over with flesh. It's not just flesh, otherwise we wouldn't even be able to stand up. And it's not just bones.

Or we'd terrify people if we were skeletons. But we're bones covered over with flesh. That is truth.

Those are the bones covered over with grace. Then there is beauty. There's no beauty in a skeleton.

Just truth. The Pharisees were like that. Just truth.

Skeletons. People ran away from them. Neither is there any fulfillment of God's will if it's just grace and love without truth.

We become like jellyfish then. Spineless. Unable to take a stand for the truth.

But God has made us with bones and flesh. That's how it was in Jesus. Grace and truth.

Now here's this reaction we see in the Corinthians. First swinging to one extreme, ignoring truth. Then swinging to the other extreme, standing up for truth and having no grace.

He says sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority. He says the vast majority, if you really took a stand against him. And that's what brought him to his senses.

Praise God, the man came to his senses and he's repented. Now like the prodigal son, when he comes back after repentance, don't just shut the door on him and tell him to get out. But be like God.

Be like the father who ran out to welcome that prodigal when he came back. And that's the point here. On the contrary, he says, you shouldn't just keep on slamming the door in his face when he's repented.

You should now be willing to forgive him and comfort him. Otherwise he can get so discouraged, verse 7, he'll just fall away from the faith altogether. He can be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

He can be overwhelmed by despair. Because when you're out of the church, there's no hope for you. The devil can just finish you off.

And the devil will finish him off, he says, if you chaps don't encourage him. There's a beautiful lesson there. That when a person repents, we've got to forgive him, just like God forgives us.

Maybe somebody's hurt us in some way. And the person's feeling sorry about it and has come to us. We must receive him, whatever injury he may have caused us.

However, he may have spoiled our testimony. And it's hard to forgive someone when that person has been the cause of our testimony being spoiled. That's how the Corinthians felt.

If you want to understand the situation here, just think of someone who did something or said something that's ruined your testimony in the town. Completely. And then after some time, he comes back and says he's sorry after having ruined your testimony.

How would you receive him? Would you have grace to receive him like God received you? And you can understand how the church in Corinth felt about this. And they were so hard on the truth there. And Paul had to teach them.

Forgive him now. Hasn't God forgiven you? You ruined God's testimony, yet he forgave you. Can't you forgive this man who's scandalized you or done something bad? Forgive him.

Be like God. And he says, if you just keep him outside the church, he will just give up in despair. The church must be a place of healing and comfort as well as of rebuke and correction.

This is the balance that there is in a true church. Therefore, he says in verse 8, I request you. I entreat you.

He says, I beg you. Please confirm. Reaffirm your love for him.

Show him that you love him. Don't just say, yeah brother, we love you. But really go out of your way to prove to him that you've really forgiven him.

That he's welcome back in your midst because he's really repented. And that your love for him is genuine. And he says to this end also, I wrote.

He says to put you to the test. My first letter to you, what he says, was like a little test to find out whether you would be obedient in all things. Whether you would accept my authority to correct you.

He says, I wanted to make sure whether you'd follow my instructions implicitly and be obedient in everything. And of course they were. And now he says, I want to clarify that once this man has repented, I forgive him.

If you've forgiven him anything, I've also forgiven. Indeed. What I have forgiven, if I've forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes.

In the presence of Christ. In the sight of Christ. Before the Lord, he says, whatever I've forgiven, if at all I've had to forgive anything, I've forgiven for your sake in the presence of Christ.

And he says, we need to do this. Otherwise, Satan will take an advantage of us. Remember this.

When you don't forgive someone who has harmed you, that gives Satan power over your life. When that person served the devil and hurt you in some way, that's okay, he served the devil. But when you don't forgive him, you serve the devil too.

You may not have scandalized him like he did to you. But if you don't forgive him, you become a servant of the devil in that aspect as well. And that's how Satan takes advantage of many believers.

They are good brothers and sisters, but they haven't forgiven someone. And therefore, Satan gets a tremendous hold on their life. They get sicknesses in their body, trials and troubles in their life, which never seem to go away because there's someone they haven't forgiven.

There's a bitterness they haven't given up. There's a grudge they haven't cleansed themselves from. Let's take that seriously.

Paul says, I forgive clearly and completely so that Satan gets no advantage of me. He says, because I'm not ignorant of Satan's schemes. And we should not be ignorant of Satan's schemes.

Satan can pollute you not just with adultery and theft, but also by an unforgiving spirit. Don't be deceived by Satan's schemes. We turn today to 2 Corinthians 2 and verse 11.

We were looking at this verse in our last study. A very important verse of how Satan can take advantage of believers if they do not forgive others. He's speaking in the context of forgiving others.

Verse 10. If you forgive anyone anything, I also forgive. Why do I do that? In order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan.

We don't want Satan to win any victory over us. We don't want to be outsmarted by Satan. How does he outsmart us? How does he get a victory? When two believers have a difficulty with each other and if either of them does not have a forgiving spirit, Satan gets the victory.

Remember this, dear friends, that when you have a difficulty with another person, neither you win nor does the other person win. It's always the devil who wins. And many, many believers haven't realized that.

This is why the word of God says pursue peace with all men. Jesus has come to bring peace and as much as it lies in us, we must always be willing to forgive and to seek for peace with all believers. Even with those with whom we disagree or those who have hurt us or harmed us in any way.

Otherwise, Satan will get an advantage over us. Never mind if the other person is not willing to forgive you. That's none of our business.

You make sure that you forgive him so that Satan doesn't get an advantage over you even if he does get an advantage over the other person. We are not ignorant of Satan's schemes. We must not be ignorant of how resourceful and clever and wily Satan is.

He's had 6,000 years of experience with the sons of men and he knows the weak spots. And an unforgiving spirit is very often one of the weakest spots even among believers. If we are not watchful here, Satan will get an advantage.

He'll get a foothold in our life bringing sickness, ruining our life, ruining our ministry in so many ways. Verse 12. He says, when I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, a door was opened for me in the Lord.

And he says, even though I had a wide opportunity to serve the Lord there, an obvious, God-given, open door to minister in Troas, I still had no peace of mind, no rest in my spirit because I could not find Titus, my brother. There we see something of the inner life of Paul which we've been seeing in 2 Corinthians. We can put a title over 2 Corinthians of the inner life of the Apostle Paul, the sufferings he went through in order to have a ministry in the first part of chapter 1. His holiness and godly sincerity, the testimony of his conscience, his truthfulness, his freedom from being diplomatic we see in the latter part of chapter 1. And his readiness to forgive the tears with which he spoke when he rebuked people which we have considered in chapter 2. And here we see something more about his inner life, his earnest desire for fellowship with other brothers.

He says, I had no rest in my spirit because I couldn't find Titus, my brother. And so, he says, I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia. He knew that Jesus sent people out two by two and he longed to work together with others.

He was not that independent type of person who thought of ministering all by himself. He says in verse 14, Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ. This is a description of how Paul lived his life.

Whatever the circumstance, whatever the situation, however great the affliction and pressure on his spirit, when things didn't work out as he expected, one thing he said is always true. When he says in verse 13, I had no rest in my spirit, it doesn't mean he was defeated. It doesn't mean he was depressed.

Far from it. He clarifies that in verse 14. He says that all times God leads me in triumph in Christ.

His was an experience of continuous victory, continual triumph. He says Christ always leads us in triumph as trophies of his victory and that's a wonderful thing to recognize that God wants us to be trophies that Christ can lead in triumph so that he can manifest through us. Verse 14, the sweet aroma of the knowledge of him in every place.

God makes our knowledge of him spread throughout the world like a lovely perfume and that's God's will for every one of us and when a Christian is depressed and defeated and grumbling and unforgiving and bitter, there's no sweet aroma there. There is a stink. It's when we allow God to lead us in the triumph of Christ in our daily life, in all situations, not offended, not depressed, not gloomy, not heavy in spirit, but victorious and triumphant, it is then that there is a sweet aroma that is spread in every place.

It's not by what we preach as much as by how we live that we spread a sweet aroma. It's not knowledge of the word that gives the sweet aroma. Notice that here in verse 14.

It's the knowledge of him, the knowledge of Christ, the knowledge of God that manifests itself in a transformed character in life that spreads the sweet aroma of Christ in every place. Verse 15 he says, for we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. He explains that this perfume is spread in three directions.

And it's good for us to see whether this fragrance, this aroma, is spread in three directions. This fragrance that comes through living a triumphant life in Christ, a life of continual triumph. He says first of all, verse 15, it spreads to God himself.

The first person who should smell this sweet aroma is God himself. It's like an incense offered to God. In the Old Testament they used to offer an incense to God in the tabernacle.

And he says this is the first direction in which the fragrance of our life should spread, that God should smell in our life a sweet aroma of triumph. If that's not true, then everything else is a waste of time. And then secondly, among those who are being saved.

That is among those who are born again. They are saved, but it also says here they are being saved. They are saved from hell and the wrath of God, but they are also being saved from the power of sin increasingly in their life.

And that's a good way to look at ourselves as those who are not only saved, but also who are being saved or should be being saved increasingly from the power of sin in our life. And that in the midst of believers there is a fragrance. That's the second direction.

And the third direction is among those who are perishing. Those who do not accept the message. Those who are offended with what we preach.

There is this fragrance of Christ that spreads through us to them. Of course the results are different. He says in verse 16.

To the one, those who are perishing, it brings death. They are offended with the truth of God. The Pharisees and those who do not like to accept the way of salvation in Christ.

To them it's a message of death. They are offended with it. And they think it's heresy and they turn away from it.

But to those who accept it, it's a fragrance of life. In verse 16. To the one an aroma of from death to death and to the other an aroma from life to life.

To one in order that leads from death to greater death. But to another one that leads from life to greater life. And then he says in verse 16, the last part.

Who in the world can ever have the adequacy and the strength for such a ministry? Think of having such a ministry. Of being a fragrance to God and ministering death to those who refuse the word. Ministering life to those who accept the word.

He says we are not adequate for these things. Who is adequate for these things? Our adequacy. He says later on in chapter 3 verse 5. Comes from God.

His sufficiency, his strength for such a task came only from God. And then in the last verse of chapter 2 he says in verse 17. He says we are not like many people peddling the word of God.

That is trying to make a profit out of the word of God. There are many people who are preaching God's word for profit. It's a means of earning a living.

He says we are not in the habit of making profit of God's message for ourselves. We are not like these other teachers peddling it. Selling it on the streets.

No, he says, but as from sincerity, as from God we speak in Christ in the sight of God. He says we are not like this great number. Many who make use of the word of God for their own profit.

Think of that. Even in that day, in Paul's day, there were many who made use of God's word for their own financial gain. But he says I speak from a single heart from the command of God in God's presence.

I preach my whole message to you in Christ. Blessed are those who serve the Lord like that. We turn today to 2 Corinthians in chapter 3 and verse 1. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need as some letters of commendation to you or from you? What he's saying here is all that I've written so far in chapters 1 and 2 is an attempt on my part to recommend myself and Timothy to your favor.

Or he says like some people do we need written certificates so that you will accept us or from you so that somebody else will accept us. Testimonials before we can be friends. Do we need letters of introduction? There was no church in Corinth when Paul and Silas went there.

But when they left there was a church. They'd spent one and a half years there. We read in Acts chapter 18 of all people Paul certainly did not need any letter of recommendation before the Corinthians would accept him.

He's being sarcastic. He says do we need a letter of recommendation? He says I don't need to write anything to prove. It earlier said that in 1 Corinthians 4 that he says you can have 10,000 teachers but I was your father in Christ.

Through the gospel I brought you to birth. And he says today in verse 2 you are our letter. You yourselves are the letter written in our hearts.

You are my letter of recommendation. And he says it's not just your life it's written in my heart. And any man can see it and inspect it and read it.

Known and read by all men. That's a very challenging word for us to bear in mind. That we are a letter that other people are reading.

First of all it was written in Paul's own heart. He says you people are written in my heart. I carry you in my heart.

A letter and all people are reading it. Your life is known and read by all men. That's a challenge because it tells us it's not just the words we speak that other people listen to but the life we live.

And our life speaks louder than the words we say. Because we ourselves are a letter. In verse 2 he says this letter is written on his own heart.

He's speaking about his own concern for the world and he says there that that itself is enough of a letter of recommendation as far as I'm concerned. But he goes on to say what we've just been speaking that it's being manifested that you are a letter of Christ served by us written by us. Paul had written that letter.

You are the fruit of my work he says. Not written with ink but by the spirit of the living God. Not a letter that can be washed off written with ink but written by the Holy Spirit.

Not on tablets of stone like the Old Testament but on tablets of human hearts. This is one big difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament was written externally.

It was a list of commandments written on tablets of stone or we could say in today's language written with ink on paper or printed on paper. But he says this is written on human hearts. This was the new covenant that God promised as we read in Hebrews chapter 8. I will write my laws upon their hearts and their minds.

The new covenant is an inward thing. It's an inward transformation of character. Not a list of commandments externally.

And he says in verse 4 we have such confidence, complete reliance upon God in Christ that we can make such claims. Not that we are adequate. He is answering the question he asked in chapter 2 verse 16.

Who is adequate for these things? He is answering it here in chapter 2 chapter 3 verse 5. Not that we think that we are sufficient by our own wisdom to have such a ministry. We are not qualified he says, but our competence comes from God. We don't have the resources to write letters in other people's hearts.

How can we do that? We can write with ink on paper and send it to you. That we can do. But how can we use the Holy Spirit to write a letter in other people's hearts? That's impossible with our own human resources.

No, he says, but such a qualification God has given us. Because he has made us servants, verse 6 of a new covenant not of the letter, but of the Spirit. That's a very beautiful phrase that describes what God wants his servants to be.

Servants of a new covenant. Not of an external letter, just giving a bunch of commandments to people, but of the Holy Spirit. Because a bunch of commandments can bring death, but the Spirit will bring life.

The written law condemns, but the Spirit of God gives life to the soul. And that's good for us to examine ourselves, those of us who are called to the ministry of the word, to ask ourselves whether we are ministers of the letter or ministers of the Spirit. When you listen to a man, you can make out whether he's

just got the dry academic doctrine explaining it all correctly, exactly, but there's no spirit in it.

The man's not anointed with the Holy Spirit. There's no fire in his spirit. It's just from his head to your head.

It's not from his heart to your heart. You remember the words that the two disciples to Emmaus said when Jesus had spoken to them, you read in Luke 24. After Jesus had left they said these words to another.

Did not our hearts burn within us while he spoke to us? Not did not our heads, our brains, understand what he said. That is always the mark of spiritual ministry, that it makes people's hearts burn when they listen. Not just that their intellects understand.

It's true that their intellects must understand, but beyond that their spirits must burn. If it's a ministry of the Spirit, it will always make the hearts burn. And then we know that it's a ministry of the Spirit writing on tablets, verse 3, of human hearts.

Not just in their brains, giving them some information. It's possible for us to preach the truth of God and to be thoroughly evangelical in doctrine, fundamental in the truth we believe, and yet to be a minister of the letter, not of the Spirit. It would bring no more ministry of the Holy Spirit to a human heart than if we recited the multiplication table to them.

We can tell a person that 2 plus 2 is 4, 2 into 2 is 4, and 2 3's are 6, and 2 4's are 8, and we have spoken the truth, but we have not ministered the Holy Spirit. In exactly the same way, we can teach the truth of the Bible, like we teach the truth of the multiplication table, or the truth of chemistry, and the truth of physics, like a teacher in a classroom. And there is no ministry of the Holy Spirit, and there's a lot of that going on in Christian circles today.

Academic, dry, intellectual knowledge of the scriptures. Correct. Teach doctrine, but there's no fire of the Spirit in it.

And then such a person is not a servant of the new covenant. Far from it. The letter kills.

And that's why you find that people who receive such a ministry, it doesn't change their lives. They've got the right doctrines, or they fight and quarrel with each other, they shout at their wives at home, and they love money, and they fight for their own rights. It hasn't changed their life.

Evangelical doctrine has brought death because it's been ministered to them in the power of human intellect. The letter kills. But when there is the Holy Spirit working, writing on people's hearts, not putting knowledge into their heads, then it brings life.

And then in the remaining verses there, he contrasts the old covenant with the new covenant. Our aim should be to be servants of the new covenant, as described in verse 6. And we can say that 2 Corinthians is actually a description, the whole letter, of how to be a servant of the new covenant. That's what Paul himself was.

And in Paul's unveiling and unfolding of his own inner life, we have, we can say, a description of what it means to be an able, adequate servant of the new covenant. And in verses 7 onwards, he describes how the old covenant was a ministry of death. In letters engraved on stone, it did come with such fantastic glory that the sons of Israel could not even look at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face.

Even though that glory was fading. Then he says that the new covenant certainly has to have more glory than that. That was an external glory seen in the face of Moses.

But the new covenant is not a glory that's seen in the face. It's a glory that's seen inwardly in the heart. And not a glory that's fading.

Like the glory that was on Moses' face, you saw him six hours later and the glory had gone. No, in the new testament it's not to be like that. That you see a man all full of zeal, devoted to the Lord and you see him six years later and he's a backslider.

That's not the way it should be. It should be more glorious six years later. That's how the new covenant is.

Not a ministry of a glory that fades, but of a glory that increases. God only can make us like that. That should be the longing of every one of us as we go through this letter.

That we become servants of the new covenant.

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