

“Ministers of the Spirit-empowered Gospel”

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

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Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 3:1-6

The most effective leaders are those who not only know their strengths but also grasp their weaknesses and surround themselves with right people to compensate for their weakness. Similarly, we are going to see through Paul’s life that the most effective spiritual leaders are keenly aware of their personal inadequacy and rely on the Spirit’s power to do what they cannot do themselves.

Paul is seeking to regain his influence for the sake of the gospel among the Corinthian believers where he has been slandered by self-acclaimed but false apostles. He is in the difficult position of having to defend the authenticity of his ministry in a way that demonstrates godly humility. Ironically, those who arrogantly opposed Paul accused him of being both proud and weak, saying things like, “Paul talks big in his letters but he’s really not a very impressive person. In fact, his life seems to be plagued with affliction rather than God’s favor.”

Paul confirms the legitimacy of his ministry in 4 ways: He points to...

1. **Paul’s established reputation of godly character** (2Cor 3:1).

[vs. 1] Personal endorsement through letters of recommendation is still practiced today, but it was especially important in biblical times prior to modern communication. If a teacher or evangelist showed up in town, how was the church to know if they should regard him as a true or false teacher? Often, he would carry a letter of commendation from someone who had the credibility of a trusted personal relationship with believers in that city. It was a common practice for Paul to write such letters of commendation for people like Timothy (1Cor 16:10-11), Titus (2Cor 8:22), Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2), Epaphroditus (Phil 2:19-30), and Philemon (Philemon 1:1-25).

As a Pastor I am often asked to write letters of recommendation for people and my word carries the most weight when the person receiving the letter knows me. For example, Darin and Amanda Kirkman now serve at a church in Oregon where my wife and I once served a number of years ago. During the search process when the church discovered that I was a reference for Darin, they spared no time to call me. Why? Because the mutual relationship of deep trust between myself and the elders at New Hope carried weight. Now imagine a scenario in which I wrote a letter of recommendation for someone like Darin with impeccable character and a faithful track record. But suddenly I began to hear someone speaking ill of this person and representing him in a way that doesn’t align with his character or doctrine. When I reach out to this brother who is being slandered, do you think he is going to say, “Ty, don’t worry, I’ll have someone send you a letter of commendation to endorse my character”? No! He’s going to say, “Ty, you know me. You know my character and my doctrine as well as anyone!” And that’s what Paul is doing here. He’s saying, “do I have need to be introduced to you again by a 3rd party? You know me. You observed my character and ministry firsthand for 18 months while I stayed in Corinth. Base your assessment on first-hand knowledge, not on second-hand accusations.

One thing we can learn from Paul in vs. 1 is that...

Reputation matters because credibility is based on character. Have you noticed that in 1Tim and Titus all but one of the qualifications for elders to lead the church are matters of character? Why? Because spiritual maturity produces godly character. But be careful here, because our human nature is slippery and we have a tendency to be more concerned with our reputation than we are with our character. And when that happens, we carry around a façade. The best way we can steward the gospel in our community is through a life of humble, transparency. And the first step is to forget about trying to impress people by appearing to be someone we aren’t. So forget about your reputation and focus on building humble, genuine, Christlike character, and you’ll never have to worry about your reputation again. A church of humble and transparent believers who lean on the grace of God is better than fake, any day of the week. this is so essential because the wokeness trend in our culture no longer wants to assess people on the basis of character. This means that our culture is going to be starving for people of godly character. And though we may be

persecuted for it, for some it will be the aroma of life among those who are perishing. Stop pretending to be someone you aren't, start becoming the person God has called you to be.

Second, Paul confirms the legitimacy of his ministry by pointing to...

2. **The effectiveness of God's work in believers through Paul's ministry** (2Cor 3:2-3).

[2-3] Paul is saying the best credentials that we can present, the only proof of authenticity we need, is the work that God has done in your hearts through our ministry. He speaks of the Corinthians as a 'living letter' written not on paper, but in Paul's heart. It's an open letter, a public letter, that people can read by looking to the Corinthians and seeing that Paul's ministry has resulted in the Spirit's transforming work in their lives. But notice that Paul is not the author of the letter, Jesus is. Vs 3: "You (the Corinthians) are a letter of (by) Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God." So God is the author of the letter, the Spirit is the ink that inscribes in on the heart, and Paul is the one who has faithfully guarded the message and delivered it to the Corinthians.

At the end of vs. 3 when Paul says the Spirit of God has written not on tablets of stone but on human hearts, he is reminding the Corinthians that his ministry of the gospel surpasses that of Moses who presented God's law (10 commandments) on stone tablets that had been inscribed by the finger of God (Ex 31:18). Paul's gospel ministry is a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:33 where God promised a new covenant, saying, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts."

In essence Paul is saying, "if you are second guessing the legitimacy of our ministry, just look to the life-giving work of the Spirit in your heart."

Effectiveness in ministry is measured not by human success, but on the basis of God's Spirit working through us. Our goal is not to be an impressive church. Our goal is not to be flashy or have impressive music or to be leading with the latest trends. Our goal is to be a church where genuine, gospel, transformation is taking place because the Spirit of God is working through His word and through humble servants to affect life-change from

the heart. This means that *prayer* is the means of our power, not personality. Our job as a church is set forward the character of God, and the gospel of Jesus, praying for the Spirit to work and then getting out of the way as best we can so that the faith of those we serve will rest not on the wisdom of men, but on the power, truth, and grace of God (1Cor 2:5).

If our goal is the Spirit's work, then the best way for you to benefit from that goal is to come to church each week with the specific purpose of receiving the Spirit's work in your life. If you do, it matters little who is preaching or who is leading worship or if we sing your favorite songs. Here's my challenge to you. Instead of coming to church needing to be awakened, come anticipating, praying for God's Spirit to work in you through the ministry of the body as we give ourselves to worship from God's word.

Third, Paul confirms the legitimacy of his ministry by pointing to...

3. **Paul's selfless confidence and humble dependence on God** (2Cor 3:4-6a).

[4-6a] Paul has confidence, but his confidence is not in himself but in God's ability to work through him. So much of *ministry is* God putting before you a humanly impossible situation, so that you can be a servant through which *God works*. Thus, the person who is qualified for gospel ministry is the person who is convinced of his inability to change people yet is more convinced (believes) that God is able to work through his human weakness to affect change in others. *God does not choose a man according to his giftedness. Rather He gifts a man according to His choosing.*

Kent Hughes has said it best: "*God uses people who are weak because of their unique ability to depend on Him...God is not looking for gifted people or people who are self-sufficient. He is looking for inadequate people*" who will entrust their weakness to Him, confident of the Spirit's power to do the humanly impossible.¹

Those that God has used most greatly, have been painfully aware of their human insufficiency. Here's a few examples:

¹ Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word: 2 Corinthians*, pg. 74.

- *Moses*, the greatest leader in the OT, said, “who am I that I should go to Pharaoh...Please Lord, I have never been eloquent...for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Ex 3:11; 4:10).
- *Gideon*, raised up to be a military deliverer, said, “Please Lord, how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest...and I am the least in my father’s house” (Judges 6:15).
- *Isaiah*, when called to be a prophet, said, “Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips” (Isa 6:5).
- *Jeremiah* responded to his prophetic call by saying, “Ah, Lord God! Behold I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth” (Jer 1:6).
- *Hudson Taylor*, the great missionary to China, said, “God chose me because I was weak enough...He trains somebody to be quiet enough and little enough and then uses them.”²

Do you see the pattern? Our confidence is grounded in the reality that God is gracious enough, wise enough, and powerful enough to work out His divine purposes through our human frailty. The implications of this are essential. *We must walk by faith. We must pray. We must be abiding in Jesus and His word or we will be barren.*

It may be helpful at this point to ask the question, if God delights to work through human weakness to display his power, then what’s role of spiritual gifts? Does God work through weak people or gifted people? Well, God does intend to work through our spiritual gifts, but we must remember that spiritual gifts don’t have inherent power (power within themselves). Spiritual gifts are a unique design, a unique shaping and capacity in each person for the Spirit to fill and use.

Perhaps the best illustration of how our spiritual gifts work is a frosting tip. When I watch Micah decorate cakes, she has a bag of frosting with a metal tip on the end that has a unique design—it may be a star shape, or round or flat. But the design on the end of the tip determines the effect of how the frosting comes out. The tip by itself is useless. It must be filled with frosting and guided by the hand of the decorator. In the same way, our God-given gifts must be filled with the Spirit and used in the hand of God to bring

about their intended affect. Or, men, we might say that spiritual gifts are like a hydraulic pump. As the pump needs oil to power it, so our God-given gifts need the Spirit’s enabling power.

Spiritual gifts are only legitimately effective when they are engaged with humility and faith. Humility acknowledges the ineffectiveness of self. Faith trusts in God’s power to work. When you put them together, *humility + faith = dependence on God*. And this is what we see in Paul’s gift of apostleship in vs. 5-6:

- *Humility*: “Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves”
- *Faith*: “our adequacy is from God who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant”

Paul’s humility and faith resulted not only in dependence on God but ultimately in the working of God’s Spirit in the hearts of the Corinthians. In 1Cor 2:5, Paul said he preached plainly and simply so that their faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. In 2 Cor 4:7, Paul says we steward the treasure of the gospel in vessels of human frailty “so that the surpassing greatness of power will be of God and not from ourselves.” *We exist not to make an impression of ourselves but to make an impression of God*. And though we seek to honor God by being as proficient as we can, the reality is that human proficiency cannot produce spiritual results without the Spirit’s work. But the good news is that though we may be dull instruments (at our best), in the Master’s hand we are useful. The best artist can do remarkable work, even with a #2 pencil in his hand.

Here’s the life principle behind vs. 5: ***God delights to do His Christ-exalting, Spirit-empowered work through the giftedness of those who acknowledge their human inadequacy and trust in God’s sufficiency.***

In light of this, the *best two ways for you to pray for your pastor* are:

- *Humility*: Lord, never let him lose sight of the humble reality that apart from You, he can do nothing (John 15:5).

² Hudson Taylor quoted by Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word: 2 Corinthians*, pg. 71.

- *Faith*: Lord, empower him to trust You to work beyond himself according to Your ability and wisdom (Mark 10:27).³

As we pray for an Associate Pastor of Discipleship, we are most certainly praying for someone who is competent in the Scriptures and has the right gifting for this ministry, but we are also asking God to provide a man who knows how to not rely on himself but on God.

Finally, Paul confirms the legitimacy of his ministry by pointing to...

4. **The superiority of Paul's New Covenant message accompanied by the Spirit's power** (2Cor 3:6).

In vs. 6 Paul says, God "made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Paul's point here is that he can be confident in the gospel's life-giving appeal because it is accompanied by the Spirit's power. He's making a comparison between the old covenant and the new.

The written law in the Old Testament was good in that it revealed God's character and defined the condemnation of sin. But the problem is that under the old covenant man had no power to obey it in the flesh because it was not accompanied by the Spirit's power. This is what Paul means when he says the letter (the written law) kills. It kills because in the weakness of our flesh, we fall short of its standard and fall under condemnation (Rom 7:14: "The Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh sold into bondage to sin).

In Galatians 3:10-14 Paul explains that the law pronounces a curse on everyone since no one is able to obey it in every respect. Yet this curse can be removed through Christ's atoning death.⁴ And the blood of Christ not only forgives our trespasses, but also creates a New Covenant that dispenses the Spirit's power to those who come under His blood.

In essence, Paul is saying that his ministry of the gospel dispenses the Spirit in fulfillment of God's promise through Ezekiel and Jeremiah:

- Ezek 11:19 – "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh" (cf. Ezek 36:26).
- Jer 31:33 – "This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel...I will put my law within them, and *I will write it upon their hearts*; and I will be their God and they will be my people."

So when Paul says, "the Spirit gives life" (6), he is saying that the gospel of Jesus Christ that I preach is the new covenant that gives believers the Spirit's power to obey God's word from transformed hearts.

Here's the good news: ***The gospel we believe and proclaim offers the Spirit's power to enable true godly living.*** The question is, are you applying that power in your life? "Persistent disobedience, without concern for repentance, is the life of unbelief" which provokes God's judgment.⁵ So be careful about living a life of disobedience under the guise of "I believe in Jesus therefore I am ok." Faith is demonstrated through active obedience.

Sometimes we wonder, if the Spirit's power is given to believers, why am I not changing? Keep in mind that the Spirit's transforming work is done in concert with our steps of faith, obedience, and repentance. This is why in the NT, Paul both exhorts us to pursue sanctification and also prays for the Spirit to sanctify us (Heb 12:14; 1Thess 5:23). The NT presents 2 aspects of sanctification: our part (a life of obedience) and the Spirit's part (internal transformation). Don't grow discouraged if you don't see immediate results. The Spirit's work in the heart may be imperceptible in the moment but it is inevitable as we continue to take steps of faith in obedience and repentance. It's a lot like running on an elliptical or treadmill. It takes considerable effort and its effective but not immediately apparent. When I get off, I don't look thinner. I don't feel lighter. Nevertheless, the calories that I can't see are burned and as I continue to take steps, the internal work will increasingly become apparent. In the same way, the Spirit does His work of change in the heart little by little as we take each step of faith.

³ "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God."

⁴ David Garland, *The New American Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, pg. 165.

⁵ Scott Hafemann, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2Corinthians*, pg. 139.

So I urge you to avail yourself of the Spirit's power. Take up the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (Jn 17:17) and wield it with faith in God's promises in a way that slays your sinful thoughts and desires so that the character of Christ emerges from your life. And then trust God to use you as a minister of the new covenant to help others do the same.