The Competent Minister, Part 3
2 Corinthians 3:6
47-14

This morning it is our privilege as we prepare for the Lord's table to go back to the text we have been studying regularly, and that is 2 Corinthians chapter 3. For two weeks we have examined chapter 3 verses 1 through 6 under the title, "The Competent Minister." And it's appropriate that we return to that text because it is so well connected to our preparation for the Lord's table, as you will see in just a moment.

When Jesus introduced the special memorial that we call the Lord's Supper and Communion. He said of the bread, "Take and eat, this is My body." Of the cup He said, "Drink from it all of you for this is My blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins." That covenant in which He shed blood for the forgiveness of sins, He Himself according to Luke 22:20 called the New Covenant. In calling it the New Covenant He therefore distinguished it from all other covenants, all previous covenants. This was that promised New Covenant that would do what all the old covenants could not do and that was take away sin.

Jesus in His death was able to accomplish what all the blood of bulls and goats could never accomplish, by one offering forever perfecting those who were set apart from sin unto God. That New Covenant, that work of Christ on the cross in His death and then His resurrection which effected the New Covenant by which sin is forgiven once and for all, forever, is the heart of the Christian gospel. And the preaching of it is the task of every minister.

Sadly, the church at Corinth was hearing something else. The false apostles who had come into Corinth were not preaching the New Covenant. They were, in fact, preaching the old covenant. And they had come in bearing not only a message of faith in Christ, but they had come into Corinth bearing a message that came from the law of Moses. You know, as you have studied already with us in 2 Corinthians that the Corinthian church had been founded by the Apostle Paul who had preached the New Covenant, the cross, the resurrection, salvation by grace through faith. But as so continually happened in his life, his steps were dogged by some who came and said, "Well, we believe in Christ and we affirm Christ but He's not enough. You have to follow the prescriptions of the Mosaic economy, be circumcised and maintain strict adherence to Mosaic Law or you will not truly enter the Kingdom of God."

It was this, this perversion of the gospel that the Apostle Paul called "another" gospel. It was this that the Apostle Paul said was an effort to take people who had begun in the Spirit and perfect them by the flesh. It was this that Paul called the yoke of slavery that the Galatians were about to be entangled in again and if they were hoping in any of that for their salvation, they had made Christ of no effect. It was this very thing, this ceremonial law, this external code, this circumcision that Paul had turned his back on and identified as rubbish in comparison to Christ.

And so, in defending the competency of his ministry and defending the adequacy of his ministry and defending the authenticity of his ministry, he addresses the fact that if you're going to examine a man to find out if he's for real, then listen to what message he preaches and make sure he preaches the New Covenant. In fact, this is a pretty strong indictment of those false apostles who were, in fact, not doing that.

Let's go back and read the text, verses 1 to 6. Now remember that the question that has arisen Paul introduced in chapter 2 verse 16, "Who is adequate? Who is competent for the ministry, for the ministry of the gospel of Christ? Who is capable? Who is competent?" And here he gives us through what he says insight into the answer to that question.

He says, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate i ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate...and then he adds...as servants of a New Covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

Now this text gives us insight into the portrait of a competent minister. We've already covered the first four points. We noted, for example, that a competent, adequate, able, capable minister has established a reputation for godliness. And he doesn't need to be commended all over again from the beginning. His reputation is known. His reputation is firsthand and it doesn't need secondhand letters of recommendation to establish it.

Secondly, a competent minister not only has established a reputation for godliness, well-known and affirmed by people, but has been used in a transforming ministry. We saw that in verses 2 and 3 where he says, "What other letter do I need than you? You are our letter and it's not a letter written on parchment but in the heart. It's not a letter from some second party, it's a letter from Christ. It's not written with ink, it's written with the Spirit. It's not on stone, it's on human hearts. What more evidence of my authenticity do you need than your own transformed lives?"

Thirdly, we noted that a competent minister has confidence in his gift and calling. In verse 4 he says, "Such confidence we have through Christ toward God." No matter how often assaulted, or attacked, no matter how carefully and thoughtfully and cleverly his ministry was, at least the attempt was made to undermine his ministry, the Apostle never wavered in his calling, never gave up, never bailed out, never quit. Went all the way to the end and finished against very, very difficult adversaries. Adversaries never halted him, they never caused him to deviate from the track cause he was confident of his gift, confident of his calling. It gave him courage, it gave him boldness, allowed him to put his life on the line and even forfeit it.

Fourthly, the competent minister has a humble dependence on the power of God. We saw that in verses 5 and 6 where he says, "We are not adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God who also made us adequate." He was not boasting about his own prowess, his own ability either intellectually or oratorically. He's not boasting about his own cleverness. Whatever happened in his life happened because God empowered it.

Now all of that down through the first part of verse 6 speaks of character. The virtue of godliness, the virtue of a transforming ministry, the virtue of courage and boldness in a man confident in his gift and calling, the virtue of humility, all of that is talking about the character of the man. We don't get to the message of the man until we get down into verse 6. And now we move from the character of competency to the content. And Paul is saying...Now let's talk about what the confident, authentic, genuine minister says. And what he preaches is the New Covenant. He is a servant of that New Covenant. He is, as it were, a dutiful slave of that covenant. He is a steward of that covenant.

His character...yes, personally he is godly, virtuous, holy. His instrumentality...yes, he has been used by God in the divine miracle of salvation and sanctification in the lives of multitudes. His calling and giftedness...yes, sure and confident so that he is bold and unflinching and unwavering and indefatigable. And his dependence, very clear. All the credit goes to God. All the glory goes to Him from whom the power comes.

But there's one more component by which you can tell a competent minister and that's what he says. And the last, the fifth point, the sufficient, capable and able minister has a New Covenant message. He has a New Covenant message. He is a servant of the New Covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit, for the letter kills but the Spirit gives life.

Now there will be more to be said about this in the flow of this text past verse 6, I just want to introduce some of the basic significance of what Paul is saying. Remember now, the relentless plague that followed him everywhere throughout his ministry was the plague of these Judaizing preachers. And you have to keep in mind that they did not come denying Christ, they came affirming Christ. And also affirming the Mosaic prescription of circumcision and maintaining of the law...not just the moral law but the ceremonial law.

The true minister does not mingle the old with the new. He does not try to put the old in the new. He understands that the New Covenant is in itself absolutely sufficient. Anyone who tries to mingle them could well come under the description of chapter 2 verse 17 as a huckster, a peddler of the Word of God, doing something that is insincere and not from God at all.

Now the New Covenant then is distinct from the old. It is distinct from the old. The question then comes up...what is this New Covenant? And the answer to that is given throughout the New Testament and we don't have the time just in preparing for the Lord's table today to cover all of it, but let me see if I can't give you a little bit of an insight into it.

Look at Ephesians chapter 3 for a moment...Ephesians chapter 3. Paul says, "As a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles, if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you...Paul says...I have been called to preach to you, I have been given a stewardship," that is to say I have been given a responsibility, a trust. And in order to fulfill that, "God by revelation...verse 3...made known to me the mystery." The mystery of what? Well, mystery means in the New Testament, <u>musterion</u>something that was hidden and is now revealed, and he says that in verse 5. "Which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, but has now been revealed through His holy Apostles and prophets in the Spirit." And what is it? What is this mystery? What is this new message that's been hidden from the saints of the past? What is this brand new message? "It is that Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of

the promises in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

What's the point? They are all of that without having to become...what?...Jews. That's the point. Without having to go through some foyer or some vestibule or some entrance passage called "Judaism," and then into Christianity, a Gentile can come to Christ and immediately he enters in as a fellow heir, a fellow member of the body of Christ, a fellow partaker of the promise, that is the Messianic promise of salvation, both temporal and eternal, in Christ Jesus. Through the gospel that happens. The great message of the New Covenant is that Gentiles do not have to come by way of Judaism, they do not have to come by way of circumcision. That was a hard, hard message for the Jews to handle. Very difficult cause they saw themselves as the funnel through which all who came to God must pass.

What then is at the heart of this incredibly marvelous New Covenant? What is at the heart of it? The gospel, that's what it says. "Through the gospel of which I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. And my job is to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ and to unfold to them the administration or stewardship of the mystery."

I'm preaching Christ. I'm preaching the gospel so that Gentiles can come immediately to God and be fellow heirs, fellow partakers, fellow members of the body of Christ. That is the great New Covenant message. It centers, of course, on the cross. That is why the Apostle Paul when he was instructing the Corinthians about the Lord's table reaches back and draws from our Lord these words..."This is My body which is for you, do this in remembrance of Me," in regard to the bread. And then with the cup, "This cup is the New Covenant in My blood." The New Covenant ratified in blood, not the blood of bulls and goats, not the blood of a heifer, but the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, is then the covenant, the only covenant in effect...the New Covenant in terms of God's saving purpose. And the New Covenant focuses on the cross.

So the competent minister comes along, he doesn't preach legalism, he doesn't preach ceremonies, he doesn't preach rituals and rites, he preaches Christ, Christ crucified, risen again, Christ the entrance into the Kingdom of God for all who believe. That's the New Covenant gospel. And that must be the message of the competent minister, and that is precisely why Paul who was raised in all the Judaism that he recites in Philippians chapter 3 about being of the Jewish tradition, zealous for the law, a Pharisee, an Israelite, of the tribe of Benjamin, all of those credentials that he had, notwithstanding he saw them all as rubbish and set them aside and he says simply this in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "I was determined to know nothing among you except Christ and Him...what?...crucified," cause that's the gospel. That's the New Covenant. That's the message.

And it doesn't need to be obliterated and it doesn't need to be cluttered with a whole lot of other stuff, even...even Mosaic stuff.

Then he goes further and might shock us a bit by what he says because he says in verse 6, "I'm a servant, we're all servants of a New Covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit for the letter kills but the Spirit gives life." Pretty strong language.

What do you mean letter? Words, is what he means, words. Listen, the New Covenant is not about words. It is about the Spirit, that's what he's saying. Words, now listen carefully, even divine words,

even words out of the mouth of God won't produce salvation. They won't produce sanctification. They won't produce holiness. The only agency by which that happens is not the words but the Spirit. The words are true, as Paul testified. They are holy, just and good. The commandment itself is good. The law is good. But it can't produce salvation, can't produce holiness, only the Spirit can do that. In fact, all that the words will do is kill, they'll just kill.

Look at Hebrews 8 for a moment. And here the writer, Hebrews chapter 8 verse 8, begins to talk about the New Covenant, draws the truth here from Jeremiah 31, as well as a few other places, but predominantly Jeremiah 31. Verse 8, "Behold days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand and led them out of the land of Egypt...that's the Mosaic covenant...for they did not continue in My covenant and I did not care for them, says the Lord." There was a covenant and it was the Mosaic covenant and God carved it in stone when they came out of the land, but He says I'm going to give them another covenant and it's not like that covenant. Well what's the difference? Well this is the covenant I'll make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord, and I will put My law into their minds and I'll write them on their hearts and I'll be their God and they'll be My people. They shall not teach everyone as fellow citizen and everyone his brother saying, Know the Lord for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them...and then this...I will be merciful to their iniquities and I will remember their sins no more.

When He said a New Covenant, He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear. So the prophet said and the writer of Hebrews confirms that God is going to bring a New Covenant. The difference in the old and the new covenant is not a difference in the moral standard, there is no difference in the moral standard, because there's no difference in God and God's morality is as immutable as God Himself is immutable, it can't change. The law doesn't change, the moral law of God does not change. God does away with the ceremonial law which was purely an external law to separate Israel from the nations around that would corrupt them. And we know that clearly, don't we, the Apostle Peter faced the vision from the Lord and there was in the sheet that he saw clean and unclean animals and the Lord said to him, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." And Peter says, "Wait a minute, I'm kosher, I can't eat some of that stuff." And the Lord says, "Don't you dare call unclean what I've cleansed." And He was obviating the ceremonial part of the law.

Jesus Himself even violated some of the traditions of the ceremony that had grown up and His disciples did as well. The Apostle Paul in writing to the Colossians says, "All of that was a shadow when the substance is here, and when the reality comes you don't need the shadow." So there was a shadowing kind of element to the law in the ceremonies and the external things, but not the moral part, the spiritual part. That's still the same. The difference is, under the Old Covenant the law of God was words. And the people said, "We will keep it," but they couldn't. Under the New Covenant the same truth finds its way by the Holy Spirit into the heart. That's what he's saying.

Paul's saying these Judaizing teachers are coming along and they're going to lay on you all these words. And you know what those words are going to do to you? They're going to kill you because that's what the letter does, it just kills you. It slays you. How does it slay you? First of all, because you can't keep it, you will experience what Paul experienced in Romans 7:9 to 11 where he said, "When I found the law of God it slew me. It was a living death, grief, frustration, unfulfillment over guilt, shame, the burden of sin, the burden of iniquity. There I was and the more I knew about the law

of God, the more despicable I became to myself, I was a dead man. The law didn't free me, the law didn't give me life, make me live, bring me joy, peace, happiness, fulfillment, it killed me." That's the first way it kills.

The second way it kills is it will take your life. The wages of sin is death, we're talking about physical death. The third way it kills, it will make you accountable for disobedience eternally, and it will slay you eternally, and that's damnation. The law is a killer.

In Galatians chapter 3 Paul quoting from the Old Testament said, "Cursed is everyone who doesn't keep every single part of the law." The law's a killer. Don't let those people come in there and preach words, even though they're true, they're deadly. Don't you think by somehow by hearing a moral code, even if it's the divine moral code, you can attain to it and live. It's not possible. The New Covenant comes and according to Jeremiah 31:33 it says, "I'll put My law within them and on their hearts I will write it." According to Ezekiel 11:20, "That they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them."

The new law is the same as the old law, the New Covenant enables you to fulfill it. The law is holy, just and good. The law of God is good. You can read through Psalm 119 and you can "amen" all 176 verses because every one of them extols the virtue of the law of God. And you can say with David, "Oh how I love Thy law." You can say, "It is my delight." You can love God's law with all your heart today and you can take your way right through Psalm 119 and affirm all of that that David affirmed because the law has been written on your heart by the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ.

You say, "Well wait a minute, what about David? Didn't he mean what he said? Are you telling me that everybody under the old economy was in the same boat, they were all dead? They all...they were all slain as to present-tense, that is they were living in frustration, guilt, remorse and the agony of shame? You mean none of them knew the joy and the peace of obedience?"

No, I don't mean that at all. Let me go into that briefly. I believe David meant everything he wrote in Psalm 119 and I believe there were many believers in the Old Covenant who genuinely believed God, like Abraham, and it was counted to them for righteousness based upon the fact that Christ some day would die and pay the penalty for their sin. And I also believe this, that those who loved the law and were able to keep it and enjoyed the bliss of obedience did so because the Holy Spirit was operative in their lives. Don't ever think for a moment that the Holy Spirit wasn't functioning in the old economy. He was functioning greatly in the old economy, and frankly, those people were little different than Christians. But the point is, the letter left to itself is a killer. The Spirit is a life giver. And Paul says, "Now that we have the consummate truth in the saving gospel, we preach the saving gospel and the life-giving Spirit takes the law, puts it in the heart and men can obey."

Now when a man comes and preaches anything but that, he's an incompetent, inadequate, unsatisfactory minister. Law and gospel are not enemies, they are friends. And though the law itself had no power to save, only to condemn, by the deeds of the law no flesh could ever be justified, the gospel does have the power to save, that's what Paul says in Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto...what?...salvation." The gospel can save, the law can't. But once the gospel saves, the Spirit takes the law, puts it in the heart and you can say with David, "O how I love Thy law."

It's a tremendous thing that God has given us in the majesty and the glory of the gospel. How can somebody come along and pollute that pure stream with circumcision, with ceremony, with ritual. But we still have that. We have it today in the Roman Catholic System and the orthodox system where the simplicity of grace and faith in Christ is all convoluted with all kinds of mishmash of ceremonies and the simplicity of Christ is completely obliterated.

A true representative of Jesus Christ is one who preaches the New Covenant...the New Covenant. He's not a preacher of legalism. He's not a preacher of rites and rituals and ceremonies. He's a preacher of Jesus Christ. He's a preacher of the cross of Jesus Christ and the resurrection. He's a preacher of the forgiveness of sin obtained at the cross by a satisfactory atonement. He's a preacher of application of that to through the heart by faith. He's a preacher of the fact that the Spirit of God comes into the heart and makes the will move toward God in such a way as obedience becomes a delight.

Now says Paul in Romans 8, "Because of the Holy Spirit we walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit and we keep the law." Who then is a competent minister? Well one who is humbly dependent on the power of God, one who is confident, bold and courageous in the assurance of his gift and call. One who was used and has been used to transform lives. And one who has an impeccable reputation for godliness. And one who preaches the cross, Christ, the gospel.

Who's adequate? Who's competent? Those whom God has made competent by these means. As we come now this morning to the Lord's table, we perhaps, I trust, have a fresh grasp of the meaning of the New Covenant in Christ. Let's bow together in prayer.

Father, we thank You for the clear instruction of Your Word. We thank You that in Christ was the once-for-all offering for sin for al the saints who ever lived, for all those who believed in every age. We thank You that in Christ came complete forgiveness, not just a temporary covering, not a sacrifice to be repeated next week or next month or every year, but a sacrifice once for all. Not a sacrifice that somehow satisfied for a few sins, but for all sins in our lives so that from the moment we believed in the sacrifice of Christ in His person and work our sins were forgiven, past, present and future forever. We thank You for the Spirit who gives life, for the Spirit who makes us alive as over against the law that kills. And now that law which was death is our highest joy. O how we love Your law, Your Spirit has made it so because You've given Him to us. Some day we await that great crowning moment when You will write Your law in the heart of the nation Israel and fulfill that great covenant to them which now awaits its fulfillment. We long for that day when You're write Your law in the hearts of Your people Israel and across this world when Jesus comes to reign. But until that hour we thank You that You're writing Your law in the hearts of all who believe. It's not a ceremonial law, it's a moral law, the law of what is right, what is wrong. You've written it in the heart and You've given us the Spirit to cause us to love it and obey it and to be broken when we disobey. We thank You for the New Covenant. We thank You that we no longer have to bother with bulls and goats and sacrifices and circumcisions, all of that. We thank You that we no longer have to find some holy place but that the holy place is in us. We are the shrine, we are the temple of God by the Spirit. We thank You for all that Christ has done for us who are the called and the chosen and who believe.

And, Father, now as we come to this, Your table, the table which You have instituted through Your Son as a remembrance to Him, may it be with joy and gratitude, may it be with thanksgiving, with

celebration of such great grace that we partake. And on the other hand, may it be with introspection, conviction, repentance, confession that we unearth our sins before You, that we might not partake in a trite way, treating lightly such a sacred moment. We remember the words of the Apostle who said, "Let a man examine himself and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup." That examination must reveal that we belong to Christ, that there's no harbored sin there, no secret sin or treasured sin that we hold to. Help us to yield it all up and ask You to cleanse what we can remember and can't remember, knowing You will respond as one who is ready to forgive. Cleanse us now and prepare us as we come before You.

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