

## 2 Cor 3:1-6 How to be a Competent Christian Minister, part 2

As I mentioned last time we were in 2 Cor, “the proof of the pudding is in the eating.” That means that you can’t really evaluate something until you try it out yourself. You have to eat the pudding to see how good or bad it is.

Paul’s main point in this passage is that the Corinthian people themselves are the “proof of the pudding.” That is, Paul could point to the people of that church as a living letter of recommendation giving testimony to the truth of the Gospel. People could look at that church and see that Paul’s ministry was legitimate.

The first main section of 2 Cor is a discussion of the privileges of Christian ministry. Paul continues that topic in today’s passage. And in the first few verses of chapter 3, he tells us how to be competent Christian ministers.

Every believer should think of himself as a servant of the Lord—that’s what a minister is—someone who serves God by serving God’s people. We all should be involved in Christian ministry in some way. And we should all want to serve the Lord with confidence or competence. How do we do that? How do we engage in competent Christian ministry? That’s what Paul is going to tell us in these verses.

Last time, we looked at the first part of this passage in which Paul compares human authority with divine action. Competent ministers rely on divine action, not human authority.

Now let’s consider the second part of this passage and what it says about how to be a competent Christian minister.

### I. .4-6 Competent ministers rely on the Spirit, not on the letter.

Paul in this section makes another comparison between the human and the divine, the letter and the Spirit.

#### A. .4 Competence in ministry requires trust in God.

The word “trust” here has the sense of “confidence” (πεποίθησις). This confidence is based on what he just mentioned (vs. 3)—God had brought the Gospel to Corinth through Paul, and the believers there gave a clear testimony that they had been saved by the Spirit of God.

Paul had no confidence in himself; his trust/confidence with “through Christ toward God.”

#### B. .5 Competence requires humility. Be humble.

Note that Paul uses the word “sufficient” in this passage several times. Humble people are not self-sufficient or self-confident. Their trust is in God, not themselves.

1. The word “sufficiency” (ικανός) means “to have enough, to be adequate.” We could translate it as “competence” or “capability.”
2. And what is *not* sufficient is literally “to think something as from ourselves.” In other words, we are not trusting in or confident about anything coming from ourselves.
3. You may remember that passage over in Philippians (3:8) where Paul lists all the things he could have been confident in—his family background, his education, his commitments, his self-righteousness. But he counted all of that as “dung” that he might win Christ and have the righteousness that comes by faith.

**App:** This idea of *lack* of self-sufficiency is a very common biblical theme. Many of the great prophets from the OT complained of being insufficient to fulfill God’s call on their life. E.g., Moses, Gideon, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all expressed a reluctance to serve God, but God enabled each one to do a great work for God.

Reluctance due to a lack of self-confidence is actually a good sign for those involved in Christian ministry. If you see within yourself a lack of sufficiency, that’s a good thing. Our confidence must *not* be in ourselves and our own abilities. Competent servants of God are reluctant to promote themselves and often lack self-confidence.

But that’s actually a good thing. If the prospect of standing up in front of people and proclaiming the Gospel is a daunting or intimidating idea to you, then you have the right attitude. Only those who acknowledge their own inability are suited to serve God.

People with the best potential as competent Christian ministers are often *not* those with the greatest innate talents and personal gifts. Those with a lot of natural talent often rely upon themselves and their own abilities. People without natural abilities have to rely on God.

We trust that God uses frail and imperfect people to accomplish his purposes. God enables us and causes our efforts to be “sufficient.” Through the power of the Spirit, we can do the work God calls us to do, in spite of our lack of ability.

The first step in being a competent minister for God is to recognize your own inability.

- C. .6 Competence requires understanding your position.
1. Paul states that he and his co-workers were “ministers of the new covenant.” That statement opens up a rather large and deep theological discussion that we could take many hours to examine. We won’t take hours to consider this, but it is worthy of taking some time to explain what he’s talking about here.
  2. .6 What is this “new covenant” that he mentions?
    - a) A covenant is an agreement or a contract. God makes certain promises that he will fulfill if the people involved hold up their side of the bargain.
    - b) The OT contains covenants between God and various characters. E.g., Noah, Abraham, Moses, David—each one of them enter into a covenant with God.
      - (1) The covenant God made with Abraham is remarkable in that it is one-sided. God declares what he will do, and there are no requirements for Abraham to keep.
      - (2) But most covenants are two-sided; God promises to do various things if his people will keep his commands. E.g., the Davidic covenant was based on obedience to the OT law.
    - c) The whole OT was considered a covenant. If the people of Israel would obey God’s law, then God would provide a land, prosperity, and a kingdom for them. Unfortunately, the nation of Israel did not fulfill their side of the bargain, and God allowed other nations to rule over Israel.
    - d) .3end This OC was inscribed in “stone.” We all know the story of how “the finger of God” wrote the 10 commandments in stone (Ex 31:18). Moses later re-wrote the commandments in stone. These commands were external; written on stone, but not on the human heart.

- e) The NC is God’s plan to write his law on the hearts of his people. In Jer 31:31-34, 32:39, and in a few other places in the OT prophets (cf. Ezek 11:19, 36:26-27), we read about a “new covenant” God would make with Israel and Judah. That covenant would not be broken; God would write his law on the hearts of his people and they would serve him obediently. The NC would provide an internal change that would result in external obedience.

Read Jer 31:31-34.

Read Ezekiel 36:26–27 *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.*

- f) When Jesus died, he said that his bloody sacrifice on the cross initiated this new covenant—he called it “the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:20; cf. 1 Cor 11:25). The Lord’s Supper is a memorial meal that reminds us that Jesus’ sacrificial death is the basis of the New Covenant.

In fact, we can see the Lord’s Supper as a covenant renewal ceremony.

- g) If we look closely at the stipulations of the NC, we find that the NC will be fulfilled at the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Christ, when Jesus returns in glory to establish his earthly kingdom. That kingdom has not yet arrived.

- h) However, it appears that the NT church enjoys some of the blessings of this covenant. Through the Gospel, we have a new heart, and we know the Lord. The Spirit is within believers helping us to obey God’s commandments.

- i) .6 Paul says that he and his co-workers are “ministers of the new covenant.” That seems to imply that they are working under the stipulations of the NC. So in some sense, the NC must be operating now, even though the full expression of the NC will not be fully implemented until Christ returns. The physical and national aspects of the NC will be fulfilled in the coming kingdom.

The AH says quite a bit about the NC in Hebrews 8-9. Jesus is the mediator of the NC. His blood established an eternal covenant.

3. If Paul says that he's a minister of the NC, and if Jesus said that his blood ratified the NC, and if Jesus is the mediator of the NC, then I think we can say that the NC is at least partially in operation right now. We are functioning under the auspices of the NC/NT, not the OC/OT.

**Quote:** The new covenant mediated by Christ through the Spirit produced an inward change whereby God's Word was actually implanted in the believers, not just externally imposed. This transforming work made the believers Paul's greatest recommendation.<sup>1</sup>

It's the transforming work of the Spirit that marks the operation of the NC.

It's important that Christian ministers serve under the NC, not the OC. We are under the law of Christ, not under the law of Moses.

- D. .6b Competence distinguishes between the "letter" and the "spirit."
  1. Paul finishes up with a comparison between the "letter" that "kills" and the "Spirit" that "gives life." Paul and his colleagues were ministers "not of the letter but of the Spirit." What does he mean by that?
  2. The NC is characterized by the work of the Spirit, not the letter of the law. The work of the Spirit is internal, on the heart. The OT imposes the law *externally*, while the NT stresses the Spirit's work in the heart, *internally*.
  3. The overall comparison is between the OC that kills and the NC that gives life. The letter that kills would have to be the OT. The letter of the law kills because no one can keep the OT law in all its points. The OT calls down curses and judgment against all those who disobey the OT laws. Because we can't keep the law, we are condemned to death. The law could not make sinners righteous. All it does is point out our sin.

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<sup>1</sup> Homer Kent, *A Heart Opened Wide: Studies in 2 Corinthians* (Baker, 1982), 58.

Romans 7:10–11 *And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. 11 For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me.*

Galatians 3:10–13 *For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” ... 13 Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us....*

**Quote:** Since the letter only specifies God’s demand and the punishment for failing to obey, it ends up only condemning the disobedient to death and never giving life or righteousness.<sup>2</sup>

4. The letter of the law *demands* obedience, but it does not *enable* obedience. The Spirit both gives life and enables us to obey God’s commands.
5. The “Spirit” who “gives life” is referring to the work of the HSp in bringing spiritual life to people through the Gospel. The HSp brings eternal life to those who repent of sin and trust in Jesus as Lord and savior.

Romans 7:6 *But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.*

**Quote:** Inward inscription on persons, not outward writing on stones, is the mark of the new covenant.<sup>3</sup>

6. Thus, we see a clear biblical distinction between the OT and the NT. The age of the OT law has ended; we are now in the age of the Spirit. We are ministers of the NC, not the OC. Our relationship to God is not based on the stipulations of the OT law but on the person and work of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 166.

<sup>3</sup> Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 274.

7. .6 And Paul and his colleagues are “sufficient” ministers of the NC.
- a) In 2:16, Paul asked the question, “Who is sufficient for these things?”
  - b) In vs. 5, he says that they are not sufficient, but then in vs. 6 he says that God has made them sufficient. His confidence is not in himself; it’s totally in God.

**App:** If you are going to serve God, you must have confidence that God will enable you to do so. God generally uses means to enable us to serve. E.g., if you want to be a pastor or missionary, it’s going to require that you get the necessary training.

8. .6 Unfortunately, people use this language—“the letter kills but the Spirit gives life”—to draw inappropriate distinctions. I.e., they fail to understand the distinction between the letter and the Spirit.

There are several errors here that we must avoid. These errors are based on faulty interpretations of this passage.

- a) It’s an error to suggest that the HSp was not operating in the lives of the OT saints. I.e., all they had in the OT was the “letter,” not the “Spirit.”

But that is obviously not true. The OT mentions the Spirit of God many times. The HSp was active throughout the OT age. OT saints had spiritual life; they were saved by grace through faith just like we are.

- b) It’s an error to suggest that, since the OT is the letter of the law that kills, we don’t need to pay any attention to it. I.e., just forget the OT; it contains some nice stories, but it really is not relevant for today.

Paul would certainly reject that way of thinking. Paul tells us that the law is good; it’s written for our admonition and example. It’s a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. Paul bases many of his NT statements on OT teaching. He quotes the OT all the time. So we must not claim that the OT no longer has any value for us.

- c) It's an error to suggest that this passage gives us permission to ignore written rules in favor of the moving of the Spirit. I.e., since the written letter kills and the Spirit gives life, we are free to ignore all written rules/standards and just follow the leading of the Spirit. We can ignore the old rules and standards of behavior and just let the Spirit move us.

Paul's point is obviously *not* that we are no longer restricted by laws or moral codes. The NT gives us plenty of moral commands to obey. Paul is not saying that we are no longer restricted by moral law.

- d) It's an error to suggest that this distinction between the "letter" and the "Spirit" means that we can ignore the literal interpretation of the Bible and adopt a spiritual/allegorical interpretation. I.e., we can ignore the grammar and context of the Bible and seek the hidden, spiritual, mysterious meanings behind or under the words.

An allegorical approach to the Bible is a huge error, and this text does not validate that method.

- 9. Paul's point is to show the difference between the external law and the internal work of the Spirit. The OT law was an external code. By the law is the knowledge of sin, and the wages of sin is death; that's the sense in which "the letter kills." But the work of the Spirit is internal; it happens in the heart of the believer, and it gives life.

This passage shows us that competency or sufficiency in Christian ministry does not come from ourselves. It's best to think of ourselves as insufficient and unable. Our sufficiency comes from God. When we are humble and rely on God, then we can accomplish great things in the Lord's work.

And those who serve the Lord now serve under the auspices of the NC and through the ministry of the Spirit. As we submit ourselves to God, we trust that the Spirit will use our efforts to make us sufficient ministers.

Perhaps there is someone here this morning who would consider pursuing vocational Christian ministry—i.e., serve God as a pastor or missionary. Your desire is that God would make you "sufficient as ministers of the new covenant." You want to serve



God by serving God's people. We start that journey by recognizing our own insufficiency, our own lack of ability. "Our sufficiency is from God" (vs. 5), not from ourselves.