



## SESSION 3

# I AM A MINISTER

### ▶ **The Point**

God works through us to make a difference.

### ▶ **The Passage**

2 Corinthians 3:4-12

### ▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

I hate working in the yard! Maybe it's because when I was growing up I had to spend a portion of each weekend cutting grass, pulling weeds, trimming bushes, and blowing away the clippings—and all while my body was being cooked under the hot West Texas sun. Or maybe I dislike it because yard work is time-consuming and inconvenient, and I don't want to miss out on other things in my life. The solution to my dilemma is simple: I don't do yard work! I now "outsource" this job to other people. A crew of five guys shows up, and with each of them doing different tasks, the yard work is completed in twenty minutes—and it looks great!

You and I love the idea of "outsourcing" the things in our life we don't want to do or may not be good at doing—whether it's cleaning the house, tutoring our kids in a particular subject, or doing our taxes. All of that can be helpful if it frees us up to concentrate on other areas of life. But one aspect of life we can't outsource is ministry. God has called every believer to be a minister.

### ▶ **The Setting**

The apostle Paul wrote 2 Corinthians while he was in Macedonia after the Corinthians had first questioned his ministry and authority, then warmly reaffirmed both. We can thank God that Paul went through such an experience with the Corinthians because it led to rich reflections on ministry. In 2 Corinthians, we discover some essentials of ministry as servants of Christ. As we do, we can personally minister with greater adequacy, purpose, and boldness for God's glory.

## *What does the Bible say?*

**New Covenant** (v. 6)—A covenant is a commitment between parties. God established a covenant with His people at Sinai (see Ex. 19:5-6) and a new covenant in Christ. (See Luke 22:20.)

**Letter** (v. 6)—Refers to the written law (see Rom. 7:6) that sets forth commands and penalties without imparting the power that people need to keep the commands.

### **2 Corinthians 3:4-12**

<sup>4</sup> **Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.**

<sup>5</sup> **Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God,**

<sup>6</sup> **who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.**

<sup>7</sup> **Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end,**

<sup>8</sup> **will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?**

<sup>9</sup> **For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.**

<sup>10</sup> **Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it.**

<sup>11</sup> **For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.**

<sup>12</sup> **Since we have such a hope, we are very bold.**





## 2 Corinthians 3:4-6 Commentary

**[Verse 4-5]** Because God empowers us, remarkable things can happen in the lives of other people through our ministries. Remarkable things happened in the Corinthians' lives through the ministries of Paul and his missionary team. In fact, the Corinthians' lives were like recommendation letters validating Paul's ministry. (See 2 Cor. 3:1-3.)

Paul knew all of the true and lasting good in the Corinthians' lives was God's work. His **confidence** in ministry was strong because it was **through Christ toward God**. Paul was confident in God's commitment to work through him. Our confidence can be strong as well! What need is God unable to meet for us through Christ? God has no lack.

Paul's confidence was also a humble confidence. Some teachers who had been in Corinth apparently presented themselves as personally impressive. (See 2 Cor. 11:5.) Paul and his partners did not do that. They knew that it was **not that we are sufficient in ourselves**. He did not depend upon himself. Difficult trials had taught Paul not to do so; he'd learned the lesson well. Though we're not competent in ourselves, we can be effective ministers because **our sufficiency is from God**. This was true for Moses (see Ex. 3:12,20; 4:12) and Joshua (see Josh. 1:9), and the same can be true for us. When we depend not upon ourselves, but upon God, we can serve with confidence.

**[Verse 6]** God makes us **sufficient** for a purpose. It's for us to be **ministers of a new covenant**. This reference to a "new" covenant implies an old covenant. God established the old covenant at Sinai. (See Ex. 19:5-6.) The old covenant was **of the letter**. God chiseled commandments in letters on stone tablets. (See 2 Cor. 3:7.) But God revealed through Jeremiah that a "new covenant" was coming. The new covenant would involve God writing His teaching on His people's hearts. (See Jer. 31:31-33.) The internal work of **the Spirit** on the human heart was to supersede external writing on stone tablets. Jesus Himself announced the inauguration of the new covenant when He established the Lord's Supper. He said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20).

In saying that **the letter kills** Paul did not mean that written revelation is bad or destructive. Paul believed that "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable" (2 Tim. 3:16). The letter of the law kills in the sense that it sets forth commands and obligations without empowering people inwardly to meet them. The law exposes people's unrighteousness and announces the penalties that loom over them. "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law" (1 Cor. 15:56).

By contrast, **the Spirit gives life**. The Spirit has renewed us and given us life so that we are new creations for whom the old has passed away and the new has come. (See 2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 7:6.) Further, by our ministries "the Spirit gives life" to others. The Spirit brings people to faith in Christ and changes them increasingly into the image of Christ.



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## 2 Corinthians 3:7-10 Commentary

**[Verse 7]** The ministry Moses had under the old covenant **came with ... glory**. The glory of Moses' ministry was great enough that **the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory**. When Moses spoke with the Lord, his face shone. (See Ex. 34:29-35.) Seeing the radiance, the Israelites were afraid. Between the times that Moses went in to speak with the Lord, Moses would put a veil over his face. Therefore, the ministry did have a distinct glory about it.

**[Verses 8-10]** It stands to reason that **the ministry of the Spirit** under the new and greater covenant would **have even more glory**. After all, the ministry under the old covenant brought **condemnation**. It could not do otherwise. The law gave commands and set forth standards. It did not renew rebellious hearts and give power to love and obey God from the heart.

On the other hand, **the ministry** of the new covenant brings **righteousness**. How does the ministry of the new covenant bring righteousness? We'll explore two ways. First, it brings righteousness in the sense of bringing right standing with God. If we believe in Christ for salvation, God declares us righteous based on our faith. By telling us of the good news of salvation, someone brought righteousness in Christ to us. We bring the righteousness of God into view for people when we tell them the good news about Jesus. When you share this news, you are engaging in the ministry that brings righteousness.

Second, the ministry of the new covenant brings righteousness by leading to good and righteous works in the lives of believers. The Spirit produces the fruit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). Indeed, the Spirit works to produce the attitude and actions of love that truly fulfill the whole law. (See v. 14.) Because of the work of the Spirit, believers grow in living righteously for God's glory. Aren't our words and deeds dramatically different than they would be without God's Spirit working in our lives? Our attitudes are different. Our actions are different because of the Spirit's influence and power. When we live for Christ, we are engaging in the ministry of bringing righteousness to others.

Therefore, **the ministry of righteousness must far exceed** the ministry that shone on Moses' face. The old covenant displayed God's glory and was rightly awe-inspiring for its time. There is, however, a **glory that surpasses it**. The moon has a distinct glory at times, but when the sun is in full blaze the moon hardly seems bright. The glory of new covenant ministry is in more than chronological "newness." The glory is in the power to bring righteousness to people.

When we serve God by presenting His righteousness to others in word and deed, the glory shows. When other's lives are changed, in part, through our ministries, God receives glory. When we reach eternity and see the effects of our ministries, that will be glorious indeed!



## 2 Corinthians 3:11-12 Commentary

**[Verse 11]** Paul acknowledged that even **what was being brought to an end came with glory**. When God revealed Himself to Moses and Israel at Sinai, He did so with fire, smoke, earthquake, thunder, lightning, and the sound of a trumpet. (See Ex. 19:18; 20:18.) Moses' face shone. All these phenomena testify that there was a glorious quality to the old covenant. The old was, however, set aside for a fuller and enduring revelation of righteousness and salvation.

If what was set aside had its glory, **much more will what is permanent have glory**. The new covenant endures in the sense that its terms remain in effect. Nothing will supersede the covenant of redemption by grace through faith in Christ. The gospel basis on which we minister is an everlasting gospel. The apostle John testified that the praise of heaven goes to the exalted Lamb, Christ Himself, who was slain to purchase people for God by His blood. (See Rev. 5:9.) The covenant of redemption established by His blood stands firm in heaven.

Ministry under the new covenant is glorious because it leads to people experiencing heaven's glory. Paul had personally encountered the glorified Christ. (See Acts 9:1-9.) He knew that every believer has experienced the light of God's glory in the face of Christ. (See 2 Cor. 4:6.) He also knew that a greater experience of God's glory in Christ is coming for believers. In heaven, we will look directly and fully upon the glorious Lord Jesus. Ministry under the new covenant is also glorious because it leads to glory for God. If we are saved, we have no reason to boast in ourselves, because salvation is God's work. (See 1 Cor. 1:31; Eph. 2:8-9.) Our redemption is based on the work of Christ on the cross (see 1:7), applied by the Spirit to our hearts, and for the purpose that God's glorious grace will be praised. (See vv. 6,12,14.) Further, the good works we do as believers in Jesus are for God's glory.

**[Verse 12]** Having **such a hope** makes us **very bold** for ministry. We have boldness because of our personal eternal hope in Christ. People may resist or even persecute us, but why would we fear them or be deterred? Whom should we fear other than the God who is Lord over eternity? (See Matt. 10:28.) If God has promised us final and eternal victory in heaven as His people and ministers, we can minister here and now boldly.

We also have boldness because we know that the ministry of bringing Christ's righteousness to others is necessary to their eternal hope. If we don't proclaim Christ, how will they hear and call upon Him and be saved? (See Rom. 10:13-15.) As ambassadors of Christ we are authorized by and responsible to God, for He is "making his appeal through us" (2 Cor. 5:20).

You and I will spend eternity knowing we were right to proclaim righteousness in Christ during our earthly lives. Let's do now what we will be glad we did when we reach heaven. Heavenly mindedness can yield earthly boldness. The hope we have in Christ for the future emboldens us to minister now.

