

New Covenant Ministers

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[0 : 00] I like this evening to turn back to 2 Corinthians chapter 2 from verse 12 through to chapter 3 and verse 6 and continue to try and get into this letter and apply it to our own lives and our own hearts.

I wonder if there's times, I'm sure there is times in your life when you feel out of your depth as a Christian, even incompetent as a Christian, or lacking confidence as a Christian, or to put it more bluntly just rubbish.

You're just feeling rubbish as a Christian, hopeless, a failure. We can feel like that as Christians, we can actually feel like that in any walk of life, and it's not good really is it when we feel like that, it's not good when we feel like that in our workplace, or in our home, or in our place of study.

But particularly this evening I'd like to challenge us when we feel like that as Christians, when we feel without gift, we feel we don't have any gifts to offer Christ and to offer the Kingdom, and we just feel rubbish.

Paul here when he is defending his apostolic work calls himself in verse 6, a minister of the new covenant, and the word there minister that he uses, which I guess is the word that we get minister from in terms of church, is simply the word servant.

[1 : 48] He's a servant, he's a servant of a new covenant, and he has been given this designation by God.

He's a minister, he's a servant of the new covenant, that is of the gospel, the gospel that was given to the apostles, and which was the founding of the New Testament church through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

So as he recognises this weight of being a minister of the new covenant, if we can maybe just rewind back to chapter 2 in verse 16, he says when he's speaking about the outworking of being an apostle, he says, then who is equal to such a task? Who can do it? Who is confident to do this work? As a minister or as a servant of the new covenant, he feels absolutely unable to do it. He may even feel rubbish. He may feel he hasn't got the gifts.

He may feel he's lacking the confidence, and as Paul, the apostle, is a servant, he feels like that. Me as a pastor servant, I feel like that. Maybe you as a disciple servant, feels like that as well.

Or maybe you as a non-believer, feels like that, that you couldn't become a Christian, that you have nothing with which to come.

[3 : 29] That's a good thing if you're not a Christian, because indeed that's the best way to come. We come with nothing to Jesus Christ who promises to give us everything. But as Christians, we shouldn't be content to browbeat ourselves and feel rubbish about ourselves.

What I want to do through this passage is do what Paul does, is he points his people and himself to Jesus Christ. I want us to look at Jesus Christ this evening in terms of what he does for us, and how he builds up our lives, so that we don't feel rubbish and incompetent and lacking in confidence to carry on living our Christian lives.

I want us to remember the gift of salvation, the gift that comes from the triune God, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. In this passage we're given different aspects of the work of God, or different aspects of the gift of the triune God that come to us.

I want us to just think about that for a wee while this evening, because ultimately it's not about me. It's not about you and about this self-examination bringing us down.

It's not necessarily about my gifts, my confidence, or even my failure. It's about Christ, and it's about what Christ does in us and for us, which should transform the way we are, and give us a confidence that is palpable and real.

[5 : 23] Now, I haven't watched this, James would go into great depth of detail about the X-Factor, you know, he's young and trendy. I haven't been watching the X-Factor this time round, but I did watch it last night.

So I didn't know what had gone before, but there was this girl who performed one of the big bang song, big band, getting my evolution and my creation mixed up, big band song.

And apparently she was far better than she had been on previous weeks. In fact, the judges said of her, it was like she was a new person. She was full of confidence.

Now that is what Paul is trying to instill in himself and in his readers, but not through some kind of performance or some kind of betterment within herself, or within ourselves, as it was last night in the X-Factor, but rather through recognising what we have and what we are in Jesus Christ.

It gives us like we're a new person and we have a new confidence and a new competence because of that. So it's really about his gift to us, as believers.

[6 : 40] Now of course the fundamental outworking of that gift is salvation, isn't it? He has gifted us. James made clear about that this morning, right from the middle of the Old Testament.

It's all about grace. It's all about what he has given to us. He's given us a new beginning in Christ.

We can't earn our favour with Him. We can't just do the right things and take the right boxes.

We're lost. We're separated from Him. We're divorced. We're abandoned. We're far from Him without grace and without what Christ has done for us on the cross. We can't be Christians.

So we accept that and we come as Christians who have accepted that grace and that gift and that life and that new start.

We're changed when the moment we become Christians from the inside out, it's not a confidence trick. It's not just that we're pretending to be new people, but we are indeed different from the inside out.

[7 : 43] A different heart, a new heart. A spiritual miracle has happened when we come to Jesus Christ. We're forgiven. We're in relationship with God. We can understand God.

We can love Him and know Him through Jesus Christ. New creations we are. So that comes by way of gift. And what does that mean then for us?

Well, it means that we have, as Paul speaks about here, a confidence through Christ. In verse 4 of chapter 3, he says, He's talking about the fact that we can be confident through Christ as people.

Now the word confident there is the same word as trust or assurance. And when we trust in Jesus Christ, when we believe in Jesus Christ, it gives us a confident.

Someone believes in us. Someone loves us. Someone important. We sung that Psalm at the beginning because it reminds us of how important God is. And we can gain a Christ confidence because we understand He loves us and He has gone it across to die in our place for our sins.

[9 : 09] When we understand His commitment to us, His victory for us, His unconditional love. When we work out that He loves us not from long, far away up in heaven.

He looks down at us with binoculars, but He actually has a love that has come all the way to Bethlehem and then all the way to Calvary at tremendous cost to the triune God.

Nailed to a tree separated from His Father, facing all the powers of darkness and death and hell.

And He has done that for us. And we hear His promises.

And we are able to pray to Him. And we experience His peace. And we know His plans for us. Plans that are good.

And we begin when we look away from ourselves and look to Christ and see these things through prayer and experience His peace and outwork His plans and believe in His promises.

[10 : 12] We begin to see it's not all about me. It's not all about me. And we begin to take confidence from that.

We take confidence because yes, we'll make mistakes. Yes, we will fail. Yes, we will stumble. We're full of doubt. And we'll go back to Him 70 times, 7 saying, I'm here again, Lord, please forgive me. And we will be washed by Him.

And we will take confidence in His promises and in His plans for us and in the peace that He restores to our hearts.

So we see as we trust in Him and as we look to Him, it gives us a confidence, a Christ confidence.

So when we're struggling our Christian lives, the easiest thing to do is look at ourselves.

Always look at ourselves. Oh, how can I make things better? Oh, I need to try harder. Oh, I need to go to church more often. I need to read the Bible more. We tend to look at ourselves all the time.

Always self-help. Whereas Christ is wanting us to get our confidence from Him and from His word and from His truth and what He's already achieved for us. What is the seal of His love has already been made through His work on the cross.

[11 : 36] So our confidence comes from Him. But I want to move on from confidence, which is important, to competence. Very often we feel incompetent as Christians, as Paul says here when he thinks about his work, when he thinks about all the congregations, when he thinks about the trouble, when he thinks about, they'll mistrust and all the things we've looked at before.

He says, who is able to, who's equal for such a task? And then he comes having said that to this verse in verse 5 where he says, not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. So our confidence comes from Christ and here Paul says our competence comes from God.

Now, it's interesting. I don't know why. I am no expert in the original languages as well you know by now. But I don't understand why when they're translating the Bible, they use different words for the same word in Greek, which would really help us understand. Because here, say for example here, he says, who is equal for such a task?

Okay, who is equal for such a task? And then he says, we're not competent in ourselves. Now it's the same word in Greek, equal and competent. Now for me it would help if it was the same word in English, because it links the two together. So he says, who is equal? Who is competent to be a Christian, or to be an apostle, or to be a minister?

Who is competent? Who is equal to the task? It's the same word. And so we find that Paul says, who is equal for such a task? He says, well, I'm not equal, but my competence, my ability is given to me by God.

[13 : 37] His competence comes from God. The word is, you know, who is, I think it's in the authorised version, it says who is able for such a task? I think so. Sufficient, the same kind of word. Who is sufficient, or who is able for such a task?

And what Paul is saying here is that God enables us. That's where our competence comes from. It comes from God, who enables us, who makes us competent, who gives us what we need to be Christians. He equips us, he strengthens us, he provides for us.

So when we're struggling as Christians, I say, ah, a minister's gone on again about things, and I just feel so poor and so false, short of the mark, and everything else, and I read the Bible and I feel so inadequate to be a proper, real Christian.

And he says, look away from yourself and find that not only is your confidence in Christ, but your competence, your ability, your enabling, your sufficiency is from God. We hear a lot in politics just now, or in the newspapers just now, and it's become a little bit of a political football about the soldiers in Afghanistan not being equipped for the task, that they're going out to war badly equipped, and that that for them is tremendously discouraging if it's the case, that they're going out to fight for their country, but they're not being provided for, they're not being given the equipment with which to fight the war, and that's discouraging and dangerous for them to be able to be equipped. But that's never the case for us as Christians.

God never sends us out into the Christian warfare and say, well go on your own, or just make do. He provides for us, he equips us, he gives us the competence to be Christians in your workplace, in your home, in your heart, in your life, in your marriage. He provides that for us. The Father God as we sung in the first Psalm is not resourceless.

[15 : 50] He doesn't say, come on, live this life, and I'll see how you get on. He provides us with everything that we need, but the trouble is often, what's the trouble often? We're looking to ourselves, and we're saying, well I need to try harder, I need to build up the competence within myself, I need to read more expert books, ABC books, that tell me how we're a competent Christian.

No we don't. We need to go back to God, who gifts us what we need to be Christians, and to Christ, who tells us all that we are and all that we need and gives us confidence so to do. Can I just invert that illustration about the soldier going out to Afghanistan, ill prepared, and imagine if the same soldier in say, Helmand province went out one day to face, to engage the enemy, and in his barrack room there was all the equipment that the British army could provide, the very best of equipment, all the stuff that they needed, all the high tech stuff, everything, it's not going to be necessarily make him invincible, but it's pretty much the best stuff that's on the go in the whole world, and he chooses to leave it all there and go out in his t-shirt and shorts to engage the enemy.

Now what would we think of that when he was provided with and given all the equipment, but he chose, well I'm going to get a bit of a tan while I'm here, and I'm just going to go out in my t-shirt and my shorts, because I want to be quick, and I want to be nimble, and I want to take advantage of the sun.

We would think that was utter folly, wouldn't we? Exposing himself to the enemy and to the enemy's strength and power by not being protected.

Sometimes we feel that we are incompetent as Christians, and it's harsh feeling like that, and lacking in confidence.

[18:08] But is it, because we're going out to face the enemy in our own strength, is it that we're not going to God for the resources and for the equipping and for the enabling that He promises to give?

I know it's hard to be a Christian. Nobody's saying it's not, but he's saying, God says, I know it's hard to be a Christian, but he says, I'm providing you with the equipment, the competence that you need.

Go to God, ask, seek, knock, don't leave His presence. I can't do it for you. I'm barely able to do it for myself, but you do it for yourself.

Speak to Him, tell Him about the lack of ability, the lack of competence you feel, the lack of confidence you have, the rubbish that you feel, and allow Him to breathe His miraculous gifts and promises and power to your life.

So I'm talking about the gift of the triune God, our confidence from Christ, our competence from God, and our life from the Spirit. In verse 6, he says, He's made us competent as ministers of a new covenant, and we're all ministers of a new covenant at one degree or another.

[19:22] We're all servants in Christ, different levels. Not of the letter but of the Spirit for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. So the third aspect of this gift that Paul speaks about here is the life. It's brilliant, isn't it?

What overwhelming provision. We've got the work and the promises and the answered prayers and the plans of Christ. We've got all the equipping that comes from God, and now, just as it's just kind of putting more and more and more on top of us, we have the life from the Spirit, which is all kind of intertwined, of course.

Overwhelming provision from the Holy Spirit, which is that He gives us the very life in our beating heart spiritually that makes us want to go to God, that makes us want to be like God, that makes us want to be Christians. It's from Him as well.

The Spirit of God at work in us. We are not, you see, we're not really self-helpers. We don't believe in self-help at that level, not a spiritual level anyway.

We can't change ourselves. We can't change our heart. We can't change the fundamental direction of our lives which is anti-God and which is away from God. We can't do that. We need this new life from God, the Spirit of God in us, the gift of life.

[20:50] At best, we can change things on the surface level. We can skim off the top few inches of the tarmac of our lives, but we can't get down to foundations. We can't change what we are fundamentally. We need a new heart which will give us a new relationship with Christ.

That is the change that we need to remember, and that's the gift that He promises, new whole direction, new desire of our heart.

I've got a really close friend who's younger than me, but he has had a quadruple heart bypass, and he's ongoing problems with his heart.

I can sense sometimes in his emails fear and a sense of inability and frustration at the danger that he's in mortally.

He's a Christian. He's absolutely trusting in God through it. But with a young family, I can sense just sometimes the underlying fear that's in his heart, at this dodgy heart, physical heart that he has.

[22:05] I would so love if he could have a new heart, physically. I can imagine what confidence it would bring him, what competence he would feel, what life he would enjoy coursing through his veins with a new heart, physically.

And I'm saying that that's what we should realise we have as Christians. Too often we allow the devil to tell us we're nothing, and we've got nothing, and we possess nothing, and we are nothing. And he's wrong, and he's lying. We have life from God, competence from God, and confidence in Christ. And so the encouragement I have to give you this evening is to go back to God.

This is a fantastic verse, in verse 4 that we've kind of looked at briefly. I've not really gone through this from the beginning to end. I've jumped a little bit. Sorry for that. But in verse 4 of chapter 3 says, such confidence as this comes through Christ before God.

It's a beautiful phrase that we are to be, and we are as children of God. We're before God. That is, everything we are is before Him. Everything we are is in His presence.

[23 : 23] It's a fantastic image of being in His company before Him. And let's again live our lives more like that, just before Him, praying to Him, looking up and looking away from ourselves, which is a council of despair so often.

And when we do that, then we change. So we take the gift, and then very briefly as we close, I'm going to talk briefly about then living that gift.

Now something interesting happens here, and I want you to notice this, and I want you to look it up with me. In verses 12 and 13, He is talking about the fact that He has gone to Troas to preach the gospel.

The Lord's opened a door. It doesn't have any peace of mind because He doesn't find Titus there. Now He's longing to hear from Titus, because Titus has been in Corinth delivering a kind of harsh message from Paul about the incest and all the things that were going on.

And He's longing to hear back from Titus, but Titus isn't there. So He goes on to Macedonia, says goodbye in Troas and goes on to Macedonia. Now there's a break here. We can't see it naturally, doesn't show us.

[24 : 46] It isn't even really very obvious from the headings. But there is a break here, and Paul then digresses for about five chapters. He just digresses and starts just bubbling over, talking about God and Christ and what it means to be a Christian and what it means for Him in His life.

And it's not till chapter 5, so let's go back. Sorry, chapter 7 and verse 5 that He picks up the thread of what He's been. It's like He's just got completely lost.

He's talking about what's happened and that He's going to meet Timothy. And then He goes in verse 5 of chapter 7, oh by the way, He says, as it were, for when we came out into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn, conflicts in the outside, fearsome, but God who comforts the downcast comforted us by the coming of Titus.

So I just wanted to tell you that there's this massive big digression here, nearly five chapters, where He's just over excited by telling them about Christ, that He forgets about the kind of vaulted geography and all the kind of story of Titus and why He's not going back, but He does come back to it eventually.

But living the life, and He uses three illustrations, we're going to talk about this more downstairs, that when we live the life, when we live the gift rather, we give off a spiritual fragrance.

[26 : 13] We share a genuine product and we offer a living reference. So He uses three different illustrations and I want you to go downstairs later and think about modern day illustrations that we can use to describe Christianity.

But we give off a spiritual fragrance, He talks about that in verses 4 to 6, for we are everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him, for we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and to those who are perishing, to one where the smell of death, to the other the fragrance of life.

Who is able? Who is competent of that? It's an amazing thing He says. He's giving us here a picture of gladiator.

Think of a Roman general coming into Rome, having been victorious with his victorious army behind him, but also with those who are prisoners coming in with the victorious army.

And as they come into Rome, there's this amazing smell, because there's garlands of flowers thrown everywhere by the people as the army comes in and there's incense being burned and there's spices being burned and there's this amazingly beautiful fragrance coming up for the returning army.

[27 : 28] And for the victorious army, it's a beautiful smell, it's a smell of victory for the commander. It's a great smell, it's a smell of the people, the people's support of him and the people's pleasure in his victory, but for the prisoners, it's not a good smell.

It's a fragrance that to them is death, because they know they are coming, as defeated and coming to be imprisoned or indeed to be executed.

And the picture there is a reminder to us as Christians, we come before our sovereign king, we come in his train, he is victorious over Satan and over death and over the grave and over sin, and we come on the side of victory.

And we are to be to God, not to the church, not to one another, but to God we are to be the fragrance of Christ.

We are to be like Christ. We are to emanate from ourselves a Christ likeness for God's sake.

[28 : 41] But we remember that as we said before, it's a double edged sword, isn't it? Because as we live with the fragrance of Christ in our lives, it will attract some and they will come to faith.

But know this, it will also be the fragrance of death to those who are perishing. And that is why Paul says, who is equal to such a task?

But we know as we are Christ like, some will be attracted to that, but some will not. Some will scorn it and be appalled by it and will hate us simply because we are being like Christ.

But we are to give off a Christ like fragrance. We are also to share a genuine product. He says on the contrary, unlike so many, we don't peddle the word of God for profit.

But we speak before God with sincerity as like men sent from God. Many years ago I was in Jerusalem, went on holiday there and actually got my camera slashed off my back and stolen when I was there.

[29 : 48] It's quite an impressive place. A lot of very narrow streets. Tremendous smells, if you're talking about fragrance, amazing smells of spices. Very narrow streets, lots of trade sellers just on the side of the roads are very narrow.

And there's kind of all kinds of different things they're selling hanging over. It's quite oppressive.

And a lot of the time at these stalls there's guys that are haggling. And they set the price of the product way high.

But then they chup it way down and they say, oh, you can buy it for so much less. And they cheapen the product. Or sometimes they tamper with it with unjust weights or whatever in order to make the sale.

Peddlers, that's the word, hagglers. We are not to be like that with our Christianity. We are to be the very opposite. Before God we're never a cheapen Christ and the gospel message.

We're never to tamper with it. I'm not sure about this one, don't write that. If I tell people that they're definitely not going to accept it. It's the word and it's the gospel and it's the experience of Christ.

[31 : 02] And with sincerity, he says, like people before God, we share it. We sell, as it were, the product, but it's not really selling we do.

We're just simply living it without tampering with it. Without just moulding it to suit ourselves or without cheapening it in any way, maybe by our lifestyle.

So that's the second and the last illustration is this letter of recommendation in verse 3. In chapter 3, are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation?

You yourselves are our letter written in our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ. And my computer, I've got lots of folders and one of them is entitled references.

And there's hundreds of references in it. And I enjoy doing references for people in the congregation, most let's people in the congregation. Because I know them and I love them and I'm able to give good and positive character references.

[32 : 03] And I only charge a fiver. I don't really. But it's good to share people's characters with other people. And in Christ, we are to be living references for Christ.

Letters of recommendation to people who aren't Christians, sharing with them the gospel. We are known and we're read by the people that see us.

And what they see should authenticate what we believe. See how important that is, what they see should authenticate what we believe.

It authenticates this church. It authenticates the message of this church. It authenticates the saviour in whose name we worship. It authenticates us to each other.

And it silences those who oppose us. Because they see that we are a letter from Christ, known and read. And pointing to Christ.

[33 : 07] It's a great testimony. And it oughtn't to be in our lives, Gain said. Even when we fail. Because we're honest. And we recognise that.

And we come for and go to be forgiven. So let us live our life. As Paul says here, before God, this generous, powerful, creative, good, holy, glorious, crucified, risen and ascended God.

Godfather, Son and Holy Spirit. Who comes together in the Trinity to work on our behalf. And to give us salvation. And let us win.

We feel our worst. When we feel just like giving up altogether. When we feel rubbish, dirty, unclean, hopeless, failed Christians.

Maybe not just try and work it out ourselves. And work it through ourselves. But let's take it all to Jesus. Because, you know, He knows anyway.

[34 : 18] He knows what we're like in our hearts. He still wants to forgive us. And He still wants to buy us back. And He still will mould us until perfection in our call home.

Amen. Let's bow our heads briefly in prayer. Father, help us to look away from ourselves. We know there is a right self-examination. But we know that that can become introspective and self-defeating and full of the poor me's.

And it can become a process that is damaging and unspiritual. Give us Christ confidence, God competence and spirit life.

And grant us therefore in Him the ability to be fragrant, honest and sincere. And that we would be, as it were, letters from Christ, known and read.

And understood. And clearly pointing towards Jesus. So help us, we pray. Thank you for Paul in this letter, his enthusiasm.

[35 : 36] The fact that he moves excitedly away from explaining and defending himself to speaking about the gospel. And we look forward to the next number of weeks when we study this digression in his letter.

And we pray that we would find ourselves digressing to Christ again and again and again. Give us freshness and vibrancy. And we pray especially that if we don't know Christ here this evening.

That we will find Christ. That we will ask for Him, seek Him, pray for Him and accept the gift of eternal life that He offers. For Jesus' sake, amen.