

The Ministry of the New Covenant

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[0 : 0 0] Having grown up playing golf, I all but gave up the game when I came to Glasgow.! The problem was not with the game, but with those who played it. Back up north, golf was! a game for everyone. But in many of the clubs here, many of the golfers, I'm glad Kenny McKillop is not here tonight, by the way, to hear this. Many of the golfers, for all their expensive equipment, were obnoxiously pretentious. They wore the best of golfing clothes, wielded the most advanced of golf clubs, but were snobbish, none of which I'd been brought up with, and all of which resolved my determination to give up the game. It wasn't the game I hated, far from it, but those who played it. We should be very grateful that the Apostle Paul demonstrated greater perseverance in ministry than I did in golf. Those he served made it very difficult for him. But because he loved those Christians he was serving, he redoubled his efforts on their behalf. The problem was that the church in Corinth was infected by the poison of false teachers. These false teachers were brilliant preachers, and they were charismatic leaders.

But rather than emphasizing the gospel of Jesus Christ, which alone has power to change lives, they emphasized the Old Testament laws of Moses. And by doing so, they robbed the church of the liberty of grace and the joy of the gospel. The church in Corinth was in danger of becoming toxically legalistic. Far from reflecting the glory of God in the gospel, the church was an untidy mess, tending more to the legalism of the Pharisees than the freedom of grace. And these poisonous teachers did everything they could to insult Paul. But rather than do what I did with golf, i.e. give up, Paul redoubled his efforts to alert the church to the danger it was facing. In the face of the claims of these arrogant teachers, Paul opens his heart and explains why he does what he does, why he preaches the way he preaches, and why he thinks the way he thinks. 2 Corinthians chapter 3 and 4 are his defense of his ministry. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul explains and justifies the emphasis of his ministry. Namely, the new covenant gospel of Christ as opposed to the old covenant laws of Moses. The new covenant laws of

Christ, a minister may preach from the Bible. He may preach to the whole of Leviticus, the whole of Isaiah.

But unless he is preaching Christ from the Bible and the gospel, he is not a Christian preacher. His message, far from glorifying God, will bring dishonor on the name of Christ.

Having explained his ministry, Paul calls upon the Christians in Corinth to judge for themselves whether it's he or the false teachers who are being faithful to the ministry of the gospel.

[3 : 4 6] Well, from 2 Corinthians 3, I want us to see together four features of Paul's new covenant ministry. The ministry every Christian minister must aspire toward and every Christian sermon must feature.

First, a genuine ministry, verses 1 through 3. Then a spiritual ministry, verses 4 through 6. Then a glorious ministry, verses 7 through 16. And then a transforming ministry, from verse 17 and 18.

First of all then, from verse 1 through 3, a genuine ministry. A genuine ministry. We love to go on holiday, and our favorite foreign holiday destination is Tenerife.

For those of you who have been there, I'm looking at the moorins at the back there, I know you used to go there quite often. You'll know that scattered along the promenade are people who sell beach rugs and fake sunglasses.

And one of the things they call out is, genuine fake, genuine fake. You can get imitation Rolex for 10 euros. How do you tell a fake preacher from a genuine preacher?

[5 : 03] How can the Corinthians tell that the false teachers are fake, and that Paul is genuine? In past years, letters of recommendation were an important thing.

The modern equivalent is a reference sent by a referee to help you get a job. So, the false teachers all possessed letters of recommendation, from whom we don't know, but they all possessed these letters of recommendation.

And they gave them to the church, and these letters of recommendation established their authenticity as genuine Christian preachers. Is that all that is required to establish in the minds of the Corinthians, whether these false teachers were true or false?

Letters of reference? Is that all? In the modern church, is all we require to establish, whether Christian leaders are genuine or fake, what other churches say about them?

What other leaders say about them? Is all we need what they say about themselves, and how they promote themselves and their successes on Facebook? Is that all we need? To establish their genuineness?

[6 : 18] Paul says that he didn't need references from other churches. Because he wasn't interested in boasting in his success. His interest was in preaching Jesus and his cross.

Rather than promoting himself, he points to his relationship with the church in Corinth. He speaks first of how much he loves them. How much he loves them. In verse 2 he says, You yourselves are our letter of recommendation written on our hearts.

Genuine gospel ministers love those they've been called to serve. They love them. Fake ministers use their people to build their own reputations.

Gospel ministers expend themselves for the good of their people. So the most important question to ask about a minister is not, How gifted is he? But does he love me?

Does he love me? In chapter 2 verse 4, as we saw last week, Paul spoke of his abundant love for the Christians in Corinth. That, as far as he is concerned, is evidence enough of his authenticity.

[7 : 32] Does this minister love me? Secondly, in verse 3, he talks of how his preaching has been effective among them. He writes, You're a letter from Christ, delivered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.

In other words, the very existence of the Corinthians as Christians is a living testimony to the authenticity of Paul's ministry. They're his reference.

He doesn't need to promote himself. Because the Holy Spirit had so worked through his preaching when he was in Corinth before, that they, through his preaching, had come to know Jesus for themselves.

So, again, when we're asking about the authenticity of a minister, we must take notice of how, though he may not be as skilled or charismatic as other ministers, there are those whom he serves who have come to know Jesus under his ministry.

And there are still others who have grown as Christians through his preaching. Genuine fake ministers may look the part and sound the part, but they do not love their people, and non-Christians aren't being converted under their ministry, and the Christians they are serving are not really growing in their faith.

[9 : 00] So, as Christians, we have to judge for ourselves whether those to whose preaching we listen are genuine or fake. And Paul gives us the tools here in 2 Corinthians 3, verses 1-3.

Does that preacher love me? And is that preacher's ministry bearing spiritual fruit among those he serves?

Are they growing in grace and holiness? Does he love me? And is there spiritual fruit? So, a genuine ministry. Second, from verse 4-6, a spiritual ministry.

A spiritual ministry. Since almost the beginning of the church, a curse has hung over the ministry. The twisted view that to become a minister of the gospel is a career, not a calling.

Many have entered into holy ministry, not because they desired the glory of God, but because they wanted to make a living for themselves. Because historically, the minister was well respected, and he was well paid.

[10 : 12] But there was nothing spiritual about these kinds of ministers, not their lifestyles, not their preaching. And I wonder whether these poisonous false teachers in Corinth were of such a type.

For all their fine talk, they were unspiritual men who had no living relationship with God. By contrast, everything about Paul's ministry was spiritual.

In the first instance, all his resources came from God. All his resources came from God. He wrote, not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything that's coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.

Paul and his companions did not rely upon their own abilities for the performance of their ministry. The strength to perform their ministry came from God. One of the ladies who goes to our running club wears a very distinctive brand of perfume.

It's a really lovely perfume, and she's a really lovely person. So when I say that you can smell her before you see her, I'm paying Erika a compliment. In the same way, when it came to the Apostle Paul, he carried around him the perfume of spirituality.

[11 : 29] Not the smell of professionalism, but that of faith and dependence upon God. Thomas Boston was an 18th century Scottish borders ministry, and he once said, a man may preach like an angel, but be useless.

A man may preach like an angel, but be useless. Talents and gifts are useless in serving God, unless the servant of God's sufficiency, unless the source of the man's sufficiency and strength is coming from God and not from himself.

It's something we've got to be really careful about. None of our ministries as a church will have any impact unless our strength is coming from God. Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain.

But then you'll notice also that the spirituality of Paul's ministry was also evidenced as by how his message came from God.

Not only his resources, but his message came from God. He speaks of himself and his companions as being ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit.

[12 : 47] For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Paul now begins to shift emphasis. And he contrasts the dead letters written on the stone tablets, these two stone tablets of the Old Testament Mosaic law, with the living law of the Holy Spirit as revealed in the new covenant in the blood of Jesus.

He talks here in verse 6 of the letter which kills. He's speaking of the Old Testament law. We remember how the Ten Commandments were written on two stone tablets.

The problem with the Old Testament law was that because of our sinful natures, we couldn't keep it. Weakened by sin, we were incapable of full obedience, and therefore, we were liable to the punishments of the law.

This is what Paul means when he says, the letter kills. Those who try to win salvation for themselves by keeping the law written on these two stone tablets will not find life.

They will find death. He knew all about this, did Paul, because in his pre-Christian life, his life was all about trying to keep the law and failing miserably.

[14 : 00] By contrast, he talks of himself about being a minister of the new covenant, the Spirit who gives life. Paul uses these words, new covenant, as code for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christ. The gospel that teaches that it's through faith in Jesus Christ the person is justified before God and given a new heart in which the Holy Spirit comes to dwell, and that through the Holy Spirit there is change and transformation.

The law is no longer written on two stone tablets. It's written on the human heart. Obedience becomes joyful and willing, and even though we fall short so often, there is always forgiveness.

The Holy Spirit always brings life and not death. And Paul's saying that through his gospel, the law becomes spiritual, not stony.

For we must remember, and this is very, very, very important, very important for us all, deeper obedience to Christ comes not by preaching the law, but by preaching the gospel.

[15 : 16] Deeper obedience to Christ comes not by preaching the law, but by preaching the gospel. Not by reminding ourselves of the precepts of the old covenant, but the promises of the new.

Life by the Spirit, death by the law. Paul's message doesn't come from the religious dogmas of men, but from the loving wisdom of God's heart.

As contrasted with the false teachers, everything about Paul's ministry was spiritual. His strength for ministry came from God's storehouses of grace, his message in ministry came from God's wisdom and God's love.

Is our service for Christ spiritual? In that whatever we do for him, our strength is coming from him. And the message we're sharing is coming from him.

It may not be professionally accomplished, but if it's gospel, then it's faithful, authentic, and the kind of ministry of which God approves and will accompany with spiritual fruit.

[16 : 27] A genuine ministry, a spiritual ministry. Thirdly, a glorious ministry, verses 7 through 16. From everything Paul's writing in this chapter, it would seem that the super apostles who were poisoning this Corinthian church with their lies were bigger than Old Testament law, smaller than New Testament gospel.

They're like legalists. Legalistic preachers will always attract weak Christians. Legalistic preachers will always attract weak Christians who like things presented to them in black and white without having to think through thorny issues for themselves.

I've seen this more times than I care to remember. Weak Christians attracted to a legalistic preacher who thinks and talks only in black and white.

Quite soon, these weak Christians, who have also become legalists, look down on everybody else. However, as time passes, that legalistic preacher moves on and those who sat under his ministry because they lacked the capacity to think for themselves begin to backslide and unfortunately are very far away from the faith.

A legalistic ministry focusing on the do's and don'ts of the faith, the blacks and whites of the faith, is a serious danger. A ministry which spends more time with Moses on Mount Sinai rather than Jesus and the gospel is a recipe for long-term Christian shipwreck.

[18 : 12] Now, that's not to say that preaching Moses and the law is worthless. If you've understood correctly, the gospel is writ large in the law.

That's why Paul insists in verse 7 that even the ministry that brought death came with glory, the Old Testament law. There's gospel in the Ten Commandments.

We meet it in its preface. I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. There's grace. And every commandment is a portion of the portrait of the perfect righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament law, because it contains the gospel, is glorious. But it's a ministry of death. And it's a ministry that comes to an end.

And it's a ministry of condemnation. But it was such a glorious ministry. Think back to that ministry in Exodus and so on. That having received the Ten Commandments on these two stone tablets from God on top of Mount Sinai, Moses' face would shine with the reflected glory of God.

[19 : 21] When he would return down to the foot of the mountain to the Israelites, they couldn't look at him. His face was shining so brightly. So he put a veil over his face.

But there was another reason he put a veil over his face. He did not want the Israelites to see that the glory of the ministry of the law was temporary and fading.

He did not want to see that the glory in his face would one day stop shining. Its glory would come to an end. The only way the Israelites in the old covenant could see the glory of God was through the veil Moses wore.

They could not see that glory directly. It was only Moses who ascended to the top of Mount Sinai. The glory of God was hidden from the rest of them. But in the gospel of Jesus Christ, there's no need prevails.

God has taken the veil away and in Jesus Christ we see him directly. Remember the words of John chapter 1, do we not? The word was made flesh and dwelt among us and we held his glory.

[20 : 38] We have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and we have heard it in the message of the gospel. We have seen his glory in the Mount of Transfiguration.

We have seen his glory in the cross. We have seen his glory in the resurrection. That's why in these verses Paul calls the gospel he preaches the ministry of the Spirit, verse 8, the ministry of righteousness, verse 9, the ministry of surpassing glory, verse 10, the permanent ministry, verse 11.

The message of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the words of verse 9, far exceeds the ministry of Moses and the message of the Old Testament law. These false teachers by proclaiming their poisonous teaching are hiding the grace of God behind the veil of the legalism of the law.

They're hiding it behind another curtain. But as we read in verse 16, whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

Whenever anyone turns to the Lord, we begin to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. We hear God's glory in the message that if anyone should believe in Christ, if anyone should believe in Christ, he shall be forgiven.

[21 : 58] He shall be graced with the Spirit. He shall be promised eternal life. As ministers of the new covenant, if we want to have a truly glorious ministry, we shall devote ourselves to the proclamation of the glory of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We shall not settle for a veiled ministry which is heavy on law and morality, but light on gospel and faith.

So, for all that legalistic churches may look down upon us and call us liberal, by God's grace we shall not cease to proclaim this ministry of glory.

We shall not stop proclaiming the gospel which alone brings spiritual life and true holiness. You know, when someone asks me the question, what do you do as a minister?

Perhaps in light of this, I should say to them, I preach the gospel of the glory of grace because I talk much about who Jesus is and what Jesus did.

[23 : 07] I talk, I preach the glory of grace for I talk much about who Jesus is and what Jesus did. They might look at me funny, they probably would, but at least I'd be telling them what I aspire to be even if I don't always match up.

See, this gospel we believe and proclaim, this gospel, this gospel, it is the glory of God. Well, finally, and briefly from verse 17 and 18, this is a transforming ministry, a transforming ministry.

What is the best way to promote holiness and Christ-likeness among Christians? what is the best way to produce holiness and Christ-likeness as Christians?

What is the best way to produce Christians who are full of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, and self-control? The false teachers in Corinth would tell you, it's by studying the law of Moses and applying it in every situation in your life.

That's the way to promote true holiness. pursue obedience to the law. For Paul, the answer couldn't be more different.

[24 : 36] In verse 18, he writes, And we all with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord are be transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit at work in us who changes us. From our earlier point, not only did the Holy Spirit give Paul strength to preach, more importantly, he gave Paul strength to become more like Jesus in his life.

We cannot become more holy by mere human effort. That's like trying to build a skyscraper on a foundation of straw. Only as the Holy Spirit gives us power can we become more like Jesus.

But notice also how we become more like Jesus. You want to become more like Jesus? Listen up. How to become more like Jesus?

It is as we behold him. The more time we spend with Jesus, the more time we get to know him through his word, getting to know who he is, getting to know what he's done, the more we shall become like him.

[25 : 53] The more we behold him, the more we shall become like him. Kathmer and I have been married for so long now that, like us not, we know what each other are thinking.

We've even begun to order the same dishes off a restaurant menu. We've been with each other for so long that in so many ways we're becoming like each other.

That's a bad thing for Kathmer, a good thing for me. But in the same way, you know, true Christ-likeness and holiness is attained by what the apostle calls beholding the glory of the Lord.

Or in other words, being with Jesus, listening to him through his word, speaking to him through prayer, serving him in the church, enjoying him in life.

The best way to holiness and Christ-likeness is not through the enforcement of morality and law, but through the proclamation and the life of the gospel.

[26 : 59] That's the best way to holiness. The gospel produces holier Christians every day of the week than law. Let me conclude this with a couple of really brief applications.

First of all, there may be men among us who are struggling with the question of a call to the full-time ministry of the gospel. There may be men among us who are struggling with the question of a call to the full-time ministry of the gospel.

I won't hide it from you. Being a minister is hard. Much perseverance is required, more patience than I had for golf. There will be opposition, lots of it, and most of it will come from yourself.

But consider the gospel ministry to which God is calling you. It's a genuine ministry. It's a glorious ministry. It's a spiritual ministry.

It's a transforming ministry. That to which God is calling you is worth far more than all the struggles and the sufferings we may endure.

[28 : 07] that to which God is calling you is the ministry of the gospel. Second application. Every Christian is called to be a servant and therefore is called to have a ministry because the word minister, as you know, just simply means servant.

Your ministry, your service, may not be the full-time proclamation of the gospel. It may be something else. But whatever it is, God has given it to you and expects you to fulfill it for his glory.

Make sure whatever that ministry is, you're doing it for gospel reasons. Not to be seen to be doing it, but out of thankfulness to Jesus for the cross and the message of the gospel.

I gave up golf because I don't like golfers very much. And I guess as a last application, don't give up church because you don't like Christians.

Don't give up church because you don't like Christians. I've seen so many people do this over the years. I felt like doing it over the years. Like Paul, redouble your efforts to serve Christ by serving his people.

[29 : 21] Persevere, have patience with us. Because if we're being honest, none of us are the finished article. We've all still got rough edges.

We're all part of an imperfect church. But the deeper truth is that we all have a perfect Savior, Jesus Christ.