

Ministers of the New covenant

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[0 : 00] Well, hopefully you've got an outline that you picked up on the way in. And if your Bibles are with you, you might want to turn them back to 2 Corinthians 2, verse 12.

Now, we know that often the one event, the one same event, can cause very different reactions in people. So, this one event may for some be a cause of great joy and celebration, while for others, great sadness and shame.

So, take Sunday the 24th of October, two weeks ago. For some, it was a dark and shameful day in their history, one that will haunt them for many years to come.

And yet, on that very same day, that was a day of great jubilation for others. A day which will be celebrated for years to come.

A glorious page in their famous history. Now, what am I talking about? Well, I think that slide says it all. Not to rub it in, but just a few more facts.

[1 : 21] Manchester United have only lost by a larger margin in this fixture in October 1895, when Liverpool bid them 7-1 at Anfield.

It's their largest margin of defeat in this fixture when playing at home. Manchester United have lost by a margin of 5 or more goals at Old Trafford without scoring themselves for the first time since a 0-5 defeat at home to Manchester City in February 1955, under Matt Bushby.

Now, those of you who are Liverpool supporters here are probably quite enjoying this. Manchester United fans will think I'm being very cruel. Sorry, Ryan.

Well, it might surprise you to hear that today, the Gospel is somewhat like this as well. That for some, it represents the best news ever. While for others, it's anything but.

After all, doesn't the word Gospel mean good news? How can anyone find it not to be? Well, we'll soon get to that. But first, in verses 12 and 13, Paul has more news about his travels.

[2 : 41] Spurred on by the Gospel, he goes to Troas, where he finds the door opened for him by the Lord. Now again, Paul's travel is being motivated by the Gospel. He's going here and there to preach the Gospel.

But he's also concerned for the Corinthians, where we saw last week he had just written his severe letter to them. Tysus was meant to bring him news at Troas, but not finding him there, Paul was worried.

And so he heads to Macedonia instead. And as we know, he eventually finds Titus. And we discover from this letter that we're reading, the welcome news of the Corinthians' repentance.

And so he continues in verse 14. And who is equal to such a task?

Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity as those sent from God.

[4 : 03] So first let me explain this idea of a triumphal procession. This was a common practice in Roman times. And in fact, if you read Psalm 118 actually, there are hints even that the Israelites did something like that.

Essentially, this is a procession of a victorious army with the general at its head, returning from battle, bringing the spoils of victory with him. Those that follow would have been the captured enemies and probably the plunder as well.

So in fact, in Rome, they've built an arch called the Arch of Titus, which is on the next slide, to commemorate just such a victory. This was when the Jewish rebellion in Judea was put down in AD 71.

And on the bottom right picture, what you've got carved into the arch are the captives and the menorah, which is from the temple, the plunder. Now, one of the things that accompanies this procession is the burning of incense.

So for the citizens lining to welcome this general home, this would have been a beautiful aroma, this incense, the sweet smell of victory or success, if you like.

[5 : 15] But at the same time, the captives, they would have smelled it and hated it because for them it was the smell of defeat. Hence the same smell evoking very different responses.

And it's the image that Paul employs here, but with a twist. Unlike the normal procession, Paul here is a willing captive for God. He's thankful for being rescued from sin and death.

Nevertheless, as captives in this procession, being a slave of Christ, there's an aroma that accompanies them. Now, this isn't literally his smell, not having showered or something, but it's the aroma of the gospel, which Paul can't help but testify wherever he goes as the slave of Christ.

And also as an apostle, he's being sent to preach this gospel message. But Paul says that he does this sincerely as someone who has himself been saved by God's word.

He's not like others doing it as peddlers of God's word for profit, whether it's monetarily or reputationally. Here, Paul alludes to others who are doing that.

[6 : 32] Hence, in the letter, if you read, he mocks them with his own boasting. He's saying, oh, if they can boast, so can I. But he's boasting about the right things. These are the super prophets, as it were, that he speaks of later in the letter.

And you see, the ancient world was seduced by such people, weren't they? They're the equivalent of our celebrity preachers today. They have their own TV show, millions of social media followers, people who get rich off their ministry.

Against that, we have Paul's own life and teaching. And he's just talked about it, hasn't he? That he's endured hardship for the gospel. His preaching is fateful, even though it might be unpopular to his hearers.

And so like the incense, this gospel message divides people. For those that are being saved, it's like perfume. It's the smell of life.

But for those who are perishing, it smells like death. And so they reject the message. Now remember how I said that this gospel is good news? So you might ask, how can anyone consider the gospel an aroma of death?

[7 : 45] It doesn't quite make sense at first, does it? Until you consider what is at the heart of the gospel message. It's of a savior who suffers and dies as the way to save us.

What's more, this method of death is the cross, the most shameful method of dying possible in the Roman world. He's a king who, though he was rich, becomes poor for our sake.

And what does it take for us to be saved? Well, the gospel says that it requires us to admit that we've failed. That we're so sinful, we cannot help ourselves.

It's not a very attractive message at first, is it? It's humbling, isn't it? Just like today, it goes against the notion of our self-sufficiency.

Today, we're so division that if you work hard enough, you really set your mind on anything, then you can achieve it. But this runs counter, doesn't it, to the whole idea of grace.

[8 : 53] Grace means we don't deserve our salvation or our blessing. And so can you see why it might not go down well with some, even today?

Not just for the people in Corinth at that time. It takes humility, doesn't it, to be saved. Honesty to admit that we can't do it ourselves. That we must trust and rely on Jesus.

And this, even after we've become Christians, continues in one sense. Because the Christian life then is marked by patient endurance and suffering. Of continuing to rely on God and not ourselves, as we saw in chapter 1.

To glory in our own weakness, even as others may look at us and laugh at us for it. That's why it's the aroma of death for some.

It's not acceptable. But for those who are being saved, which I hope is many of us here, the gospel is good news, isn't it? Because it rescues us from death.

[9 : 59] It gives us the assurance of eternal life. Now, incidentally, Paul reminds us of another dimension of this aroma, if you read those verses. It's not simply horizontal, is it?

The smell that goes out to people. But it's also a pleasing aroma, vertically, to God. And I think the idea here is similar to when we looked at Romans 12. The idea of living sacrifices.

And so that what Paul is saying is that no matter how people might respond horizontally, if we are faithful in our preaching, if he was faithful in his preaching, it's always a pleasing aroma to God, vertically.

And so I wonder whether you have this same perspective as you serve God. We naturally want our message to be well received by others.

And yes, we ought to be winsome in how we go about it. But at the end of the day, what's most important to us is that we preach in a way that pleases the Lord, isn't it? Not to be peddlers of the word, saying what it takes to make it acceptable to others, but being faithful so that whether people accept or reject it, we know that God will be pleased in what we're saying.

[11 : 12] The rest, the results, we leave it to God, don't we? To work out whether people are saved or not. Well, that's the first part of our passage today.

In the second part, Paul tackles an accusation that's floating around as he writes to them. Namely, that they are thinking, or some within the church are thinking, that he lacks the authority in his preaching to do what he's doing.

Perhaps his preaching was divisive, and therefore people were questioning whether he had a right to preach or not. So in chapter 3, verse 1, he continues. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again, or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?

You yourselves are a letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the Living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.

And so here again, we have another ancient practice of letters of recommendation or commendation. And I suppose it's similar to the character references that we now ask for, you know, whether it's a job application or to enroll at Ridley or something.

[12 : 26] Some of you have asked me to write some of those for you. And the purpose of those are simply for me, to someone who knows you, to vouch for your character or credentials.

And I often write nice things, so you can ask me for a reference anytime. Truthful but nice. Well, it's no different in those days, is it? Except it was probably more important, because in those days they didn't have VC certificates or, you know, university degrees that you could just show and say, I've done this.

You actually needed someone in authority to say, yep, they're legit. And so preachers and teachers would often carry such letters as they go from city to city to vouch for their credentials.

And this may have probably occurred with those who came to Corinth. They were carrying letters with someone with a recognized authority, perhaps another apostle back in Jerusalem. And then they were using it to say, listen to us.

We have the authority to preach the Bible. Paul, by contrast, didn't have such a letter. And so he was open to the accusation that his preaching carried no weight.

[13 : 34] But Paul actually didn't need such a letter, did he? Why? Well, first, because his appointment was coming directly from God. He wasn't sent by another human being, but sent by God as an apostle.

And further, when he came to Corinth, there was no church there. And so when he started to preach, letters of commendation were useless because nobody recognized the authority of the apostle back in Jerusalem.

Instead, Paul was the one that started the church in Corinth based solely on their response of faith to his preaching. And so that's why Paul claims that there are his letters of commendation.

You are proof of my authority. Or as he says, you are a letter from Christ, a result of our ministry. And so if they insisted on a letter, Paul was saying, just look at yourselves.

You are the reason, you are proof that what I'm saying carries authority. Because you believed and you were converted. But Paul goes on with the analogy, doesn't he?

[14 : 39] He says that the way Christ has written this letter is not with ink on parchment, but by the Spirit in their lives. And that's why Paul cares so much for their faith.

They were proof that his preaching carried Christ's authority. And he wasn't doing it so that he could then boast about the Corinthian church to others. But it was more of an encouragement to himself, especially given his suffering for them, that what he was doing was indeed God's work.

Now I know that as pastors or leaders and people who serve, we're not like Paul as an apostle here, right? Or in his suffering. And yet, our motivation is also the same, isn't it?

There should be no greater joy for us than seeing the gospel have the effect that it does on the people that we lead or serve. And so yes, like Paul, there's real grief, isn't there?

When brothers and sisters that we love and we disciple walk away from the faith. Yes, when we serve God, we're a pleasing aroma to Him.

[15 : 55] But it's not up to us, is it? To decide whether what we say will be received with joy, like an aroma of life, or rejected, like an aroma of death.

And so that's why Paul continues in verse 4 that we need to be reliant on God in what we do. He says, Such confidence we have through Christ before God.

Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit.

For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Yes, Paul speaks confidently of the impact of his ministry on the Corinthians, but he says that such confidence only comes through Christ before God.

The effectiveness of what he does is wholly dependent on God's work among them. It's God's power at work, not His work, that makes them letters of commendation from Christ.

[17 : 00] It's when the Spirit is writing the Gospel in their hearts that God is doing that work. And so when Paul speaks of competence here, I had to try not to trip over myself saying it how many times?

Three or four times. What is commonly understood is not so much the expertise or the knowledge that someone brings to a job, but rather the effectiveness of it. Paul says his effectiveness comes only when God works by His Spirit to produce life in God's people.

Otherwise, as with many who try to be saved through external adherence to the law, the letter kills.

Or in verse 3, there are Christ's letters written not with ink, but by the Spirit, not on tablets of stone, which is a reference to the Old Testament law, but not on tablets of human hearts.

Now, there's quite a few things to say here, but I think these verses can be quite misunderstood, and so I want to just unpack it a bit. For example, the first misunderstanding might be that we think that Paul is pitting the law in the Old Testament here against the work of the Spirit in the New Testament times.

[18 : 17] But this isn't right, is it? We had that Old Testament reading earlier in Jeremiah chapter 31, verse 31, and it says, The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.

It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord.

I will put my law into their minds and write it on their hearts. Or in a similar vein, another passage which we didn't read, Ezekiel chapter 36, 26 to 27 says, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.

I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

All that's talking about the Old Testament, is it? Decrees, laws, those are the Old Testament. And in fact, these two prophecies come from the Old Testament, which God intends to fulfill and didn't fulfill.

[19 : 31] And so, the Old Testament is life-giving as well. It has life-giving promises. But the thing is, it's only fulfilled with the Spirit and not without it.

And so, the Old Testament as God's Word isn't obsolete. But rather, it finds its fulfillment when God sends His Spirit.

And only then can God's people truly obey His law from the heart. The heart of flesh and not the heart of stone. And so, it's not the law in the Old Testament that's the problem.

It's our inability to obey that's the problem without the Spirit. For it serves instead to condemn us. That's what it means by the letter kills for failing to keep it.

But when we believe in Jesus and enter into the New Covenant through the sacrifice of His death, we are given the Spirit to then help us obey God's Word. So, that's the first misunderstanding.

[20 : 35] The next one, which is common, is to think of the work of the Spirit as something that's emotional. So, if the letter kills, then, you know, head knowledge is bad.

Instead, we, you know, need to have the feels for the Spirit. Have the right emotions of joy and peace towards God. Now, again, that's not right. Instead, evidence of the Spirit at work in us is through faith leading to obedience.

It's not about feeling. It's about believing and then obeying. It's trying to obey the law without faith that kills.

But when obedience is by faith, that's what the Spirit enables us to do. Can you see the difference? And it happens when the law is written in our hearts as it says in Ezekiel and Jeremiah.

We obey because we trust in the promises of God's Word. It allows us to be patient in suffering, to have hope in the midst of trials, whether we feel closer to God or not, the emotion, that's secondary.

[21 : 44] So don't read the Spirit as equating it with having to feel something. And finally, the third common misunderstanding is to think that what's then important is good works and not the Word.

After all, if what the Spirit does is help us to obey, some may think, it's all about what we do rather than Bible knowledge. Now again, that's to separate the Spirit and the Word, isn't it?

Instead, what God's Spirit does is He uses the Word to bring about the required transformation in our lives. So yes, it's never just about trying to learn the Bible to improve our Bible knowledge, to quote and argue the Bible with others, but it's also not just about all you need to do is be a good person.

Just be like Jesus and ignore God's Word. In fact, you can't be like Jesus if you ignore God's Word. Rather, it's about responding to God's Word to see our lives changed by the work of the Spirit.

That's how it goes, hand in hand. And that's why we keep preaching the Gospel. Paul continues to preach the Gospel, doesn't he? We keep teaching and studying God's Word because that's the tool that the Spirit uses to give life.

[22 : 57] The letter kills does not mean that you don't use the Word. The Spirit doesn't work independently from God's Word, just as the Word without the Spirit cannot produce life.

And so, let me recap. The phrase, the letter kills but the Spirit gives life on the next slide, doesn't mean the doing away with the Old Testament as bad and only recognizing the new.

It's also not seeing emotions, the feels, apart from faith to obey. And thirdly, it's not spiritual transformation apart from the Word but rather recognizing that the Spirit uses God's Word to achieve spiritual transformation so that our lives in response to God's Gospel becomes letters of commendation from Christ.

All of which means, I don't know whether that's dawn on you, all of which means that when we do ministry, that's such an amazing privilege, isn't it?

I don't wish to downplay all the other things we do in life because everything is done to serve and glorify God but there is a sense in which when you read the Bible with someone, when you lead a group of kids on Sunday telling them about the Bible, when you tell someone about the good news of Jesus, it's very different, isn't it, to mentoring someone professionally or coaching a junior basketball team or something or teaching chemistry at school, even though that's great that some of you teach chemistry at school, but when you do that, the Spirit is working, you're working with the Spirit or the Spirit is working with you to do this miraculous work, isn't it?

[24 : 43] That's what ministry, ministry, it's always miraculous work, isn't it? Because unless the Spirit does something, it's ineffective. So when you do ministry, even though you think it might just be mundane, it's actually a miracle that's happening because the Spirit is intervening to bring about life in the hearts of people.

And so to me, that's amazing, that's a privilege. And I want to encourage you that those of you who are serving, just keep going. I know it's hard work, but keep going. And for those of you who want to step up to do more service, well, come talk to me or Jeff or Michelle or Andrew.

Get involved with the many miracles that are happening each week in our church. Let's pray. Father, thank you for the gift of your Spirit that produces life in us through your Son.

Help us to live by faith in obedience to your Word. Teach us to be faithful in our service so that others may become letters from Christ, written not with ink on stones of tablet, but by the Spirit on tablets of human hearts.

This we ask and plead in the name of Jesus. Amen.