

“DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES?”
(2 Corinthians 3:1-6)

This morning I want to talk to you about: Do you have what it takes? Whenever you apply for a job, your potential employer wants to know two basic things: Number one, are you qualified? Do you have the training and education required for the job? When I go to the doctor, I like seeing their medical degrees hanging on the wall because it tells me that they’ve been trained and educated and are qualified to make a diagnosis or prescribe me a pill. The second thing employers want to know is: Are you competent? You may have the education and the training, but can you do the job?

28 years ago, this church did a pretty thorough evaluation of me before they called me as pastor. I was serving as an associate pastor over in the Rogue Valley and was doing a lot of preaching the summer of ’95. The pastoral search committee could not all come over the same time to hear me preach, so they kept sending one or two over at a time what seemed like every week, which meant that instead of having to preach one good sermon, I had to preach a good sermon every week. It just so happened to be the most stressful summer of my life. Not only was I preaching nearly every week, but I directed three summer Bible camps, and in the midst of it all, our first baby died. After it was all said and done, they called me to their pastor and we moved over to Gold Beach a few months later.

We’ve been looking at the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians, and over and over in this book we see the word “minister” and “ministry.” We naturally think of a pastor as being the minister and the one doing ministry, but according to the New Testament, God has called every believer to be minister and to be involved in the ministry of the church. The Greek word for “ministry” means “to serve.” God has called us to serve Him and other people in His name. Anything we do to help people physically, emotionally, and spiritually is a ministry – and our passage today gives us gives us some profound insight on what it takes to minister to people.

Throughout the book of 2 Corinthians the Apostle Paul addresses an ongoing problem in the church at Corinth he started a few years earlier. Certain influential teachers had infiltrated the church after Paul left and tried to discredit him in the eyes of the Corinthian believers. It was a very discouraging time, but Paul kept focused on his mission, and that mission – stated in chapter two – was to be the aroma of Christ, spreading the message of good news of Christ to everyone. Some will be attracted to the aroma, be saved, and find life – and some will be repelled by the aroma, reject Christ, and remain lost in sin.

In 2:16 Paul asks a question that is answered in our passage today. He says, “Who is equal to such a task? Who has what it takes to speak boldly for Christ in the face of such great opposition and rejection?” It’s a question that’s been asked by several servants of the Lord. Moses said, “I can’t do it – nobody will listen to me – and I don’t know how to speak well.” Gideon said, “I can’t do it – I’m from the smallest tribe in the nation and have no clout.” Jeremiah said, “I’m too young.” Isaiah said, “I’m too sinful.”

What Paul is going to say in chapter 3 takes us by surprise because he says, “I’m up to the task... I have what it takes.” Who would dare to say such a thing, and should we have the same attitude as those who have been called by God to represent Him? In verses 1-3 of chapter 3 Paul is going to say why he is *qualified* to be a minister of the gospel, and by extension, why every believer is qualified to be a minister. Then in verses 4-6 he will state why we as ministers are *competent* to do the job God has called us to.

Let's begin by reading verses 1-3... "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 our 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."

There's a lot packed into these three verses, and to understand what Paul is saying we need to remember the context. Paul has just said, "Who is up to the task?" and in the last verse of chapter two he says, "We are." He knows that his opponents will use this confidence against him and say, "There goes Paul, bragging once again, trying to commend himself." Paul's question is rhetorical... "Are we trying to commend ourselves? Not at all."

The second question he anticipates his opponents asking is: Where are Paul's letters of recommendation? From time to time I'm asked to write a letter of recommendation for someone who's applying to college or seeking a job – and vouch that they're a good person and list their good qualities. In the first century letters of recommendation were very common, especially since communication was slow and limited. You couldn't just call or text someone for a referral, so you carried letters of recommendation with you.

In Paul's day it was common for teachers and speakers to travel around from town to town trying to gain a following of people. Some wanted to make money, some wanted to elevate their status, and some wanted to push a particular teaching or agenda. Some wanted to do all of the above.

Many of these teachers, we find out in 2 Corinthians, were Jews – referred to as Judaizers – who taught that along with trusting Christ for salvation you need to follow Jewish rules and customs – such as being circumcised and eating kosher food and keeping the Sabbath. The Apostle Paul understood Judaizers because he had once been like them. When Christians began spreading the message that you are saved only through faith in Christ and not Jewish customs, he made it his life's mission to destroy Christianity.

But when he was dramatically saved on the road to Damascus, he preached that salvation was found in Christ alone, apart from works. Some Jewish converts to the faith said, "No, you need Christ plus Jewish law and custom," and some of these Jewish teachers had made their way to Corinth to attack Paul and persuade people not to follow him and his teaching.

Paul didn't carry any letters of recommendation, and we'll see why in a minute. His opponents used this as an opportunity to discredit him. "Where's Paul's letters? How can you trust someone who doesn't carry letters of recommendation?"

Paul's answer is profound. Verse 2... "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone." "You're our letter! The only letter we – Paul speaking of he and his missionary team – the only letter we need is you and the unmistakable evidence that your lives have been changed by the gospel of Christ we preached to you. In a nutshell, Paul describes what a successful church is – it's not how many people come, it's not how much giving there is in the offering, it's not how many programs we have, and it's not how talented and gifted the congregation is – all of these are good – but a church's success is ultimately based on changed lives. A successful church focuses on valuing people and helping them to grow and change in Christ.

When Paul came to Corinth and few years earlier, a number of people were saved under his ministry. They were very green in the faith, and very immature. But Paul loved them, disciplined them, encouraged them, and helped them grow in their faith. Week by week, month by month, their lives began to change. There's a great passage in 1 Corinthians 6 where Paul lists all the kinds of sins the Corinthians were involved in before they were saved, and then he says, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). Paul didn't need a letter of recommendation because the changed lives of the Corinthians were his recommendation.

Paul takes the opportunity to expand on his word picture of being a living letter to show the difference between his ministry and the ministry of the Judaizers. First, he expresses that the Corinthian believers are a living letter "written on our hearts." Every person Paul led to Christ was forever on his heart. As their spiritual father in the faith, Paul thought about, prayed about, and worried about his spiritual children – they were continually on his heart.

He then expresses the purpose of this living letter... "You are to be known and read by everyone." Many people may never read a Bible, but they read you. As they observe and study your life, they see what you're about, how you handle adversity, and how your actions match your words. Our job as ministers is to help others see Christ through us. Jesus put it this way... "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

Now that Jesus – the light of the world – has ascended back to heaven, He has left you and me to be His light-bearers on earth, and as someone said, you may be the only Jesus someone sees. When they see you radiate the love of Jesus, when they see His transforming power at work in your life, they will tell that something is different, and it will open up the opportunity for you to tell them about Jesus and how He can change their lives.

Paul goes on to say that the author of this living letter is Christ Himself. Christ is the author of the Corinthian's salvation, and Paul and his missionary team were the mailmen who delivered the message of salvation and established a church in Corinth. He says, "You are the result of our ministry – you are the fruit of our labors. Don't let these so-called teachers divide you and me – we are tied together through the work of Christ."

Paul concludes his word picture of living letters by making two contrasts. First, he says, "You are written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God." Human letters of recommendation are written in ink – they're merely written words on a page – but Paul's living letter of commendation in the Corinthians is written by the Spirit of the living God. Where ink makes mere words, the Holy Spirit brings the words to life. The Jewish teachers offered a way of life dependent on rules and customs, a way devoid of any ability to change lives. But believers born again by the Spirit of God are spiritually resurrected to a new life – through the Spirit they are given the ability, the desire, and the power to change and bear fruit.

The contrast of ink versus Spirit causes Paul to think of a second contrast between himself and his Jewish opponents. He says, "You are a letter written by Christ not on tablets of stone but on tablets of the human heart." If you've watched the Ten Commandments movie, you might remember the iconic scene where Charlton Heston, playing Moses, is on Mt. Sinai when God appears as a fire and emblazons the Ten Commandments on the two tablets of stone.

The Ten Commandments were given by God to Israel as a standard of morality they were to live by as His chosen people. The first four laws governed their relationship with God, and the last six governed their relationship with others. The commandments were not only given to bless and protect Israel and cause her to flourish as a nation, but to reveal their sinful inclination and inability to obey them on their own. The Old Testament is largely the story of how Israel failed to keep God's law and time after time rebelled and turned against God. They had the law – they had the commandments – what they didn't have was the power to keep them.

The prophet Ezekiel prophesied that one day God do a new work in His people... “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 11:19). Ezekiel predicted that God would remove Israel's heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh. A heart of stone is hard and unpliant, it is stiff and resistant – but a heart of flesh is soft and pliant – it lives and breathes and can be molded into what God wants to make it. Paul says, “The day that Ezekiel predicted is here, and your lives are a living fulfillment of it. Now that Christ has come, the Spirit of the living God is writing God's law on hearts, not on tablets – and He's changing people internally, not just externally – and you experienced this transformation when I came to Corinth and you received the message of Christ.”

In verses 4-6 Paul shifts from speaking of qualification for ministry to competence for ministry. 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.”

Paul says, “We have what it takes – we can spread the aroma of Christ – we can preach the message of Christ with boldness – and we can minister to people with confidence.” You say, “I wish I could be as confident as Paul, but when I think about talking to people about my faith, I get tongue-tied... when I think about trying to help someone grow spiritually, I don't feel up to the task.”

Paul makes it clear that his confidence is not self-confidence – he's not depending on his own abilities – it is a confidence in God rooted in His relationship with Christ. Before he came to faith in Christ, Paul was extremely self-confident. In Philippians 3 he describes how as a religiously devout Jew, he was sure that his outward displays of righteousness made him a shoo-in for heaven. But on the road to Damascus God knocked all of Paul's self-confidence from him, because God cannot work through self-confident, self-reliant people, but only those completely dependent on Him. Later in chapter 12 of 2 Corinthians Paul will talk about how God gave him a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble. Paul daily dealt with some physical problem that kept him continually relying on the Lord and not himself.

Beginning in verse 6, and continuing through the rest of chapter 3, Paul is going to draw a comparison between his ministry and the ministry of Moses. Moses was a minister of the Old Covenant and Paul was a minister of the New Covenant. We'll talk about the differences in their ministries in a minute, but what they had in common is that they were both called of God, and both depended on God to do what God called them to do.

Moses, you might remember, felt totally inadequate to serve God. When God appeared to him in a burning bush and said, “I'm sending you to Pharaoh to deliver my people out of Egypt,” Moses said, “Who, me? Who am I that I should go to King Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the region?” God said, “I will be with you.” “What if they ask me the name of the one who sent me?” God said, “Tell them ‘I am who I am’ sent you.”

“What if they don’t listen to me?” God said, “I’ll work miracles through you to show them my power.” Moses said, “I’m not very good at speaking – I get tongue-tied.” God said, “I will help you speak and tell you what to say.”

Moses listed every excuse he could think of, but God said, “Just go... I will enable you to do what I’ve called you to do.” It’s the same thing God said to Gideon and Elijah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel... “Lord, I’m not up to the task.” God says, “I will be with you.” God delights in using weak vessels to display His glory. He can’t use a former zealot like Paul who boasted in his own abilities – He can only use someone who has been humbled and broken. As Paul will say later in chapter 12... “His power is made perfect in my weakness.”

In verse 6 Paul says, “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant.” “The Jewish teachers who have infiltrated the church are pushing an old covenant, but we are ministers of a new covenant.” A major storyline in the Bible is the old and new covenant, which we’ll touch on this morning and talk more about next week.

A covenant in the Bible was the way God communicated His promises and plans to His people. It was a way of saying, “This is how our relationship is going to go.” The ways God worked with His people is reflected in the Old and New Testaments. The English word “testament” is derived from the Greek word for “covenant.” The Old Testament is the story of how God worked in the lives of people before Jesus, and the New Testament is the story of how God works in lives after Jesus.

In the Old Testament God worked with the nation of Israel through the old covenant. After God brought Israel out of Egypt, He led them to Mt. Sinai where, through Moses, He gave them the law. The word “law” means “instruction,” and were the standards God wanted His people to follow and obey. The Ten Commandments are a summary of what are altogether 613 commandments in the Old Testament law, covering everything from moral laws to civil laws and ceremonial laws.

Romans 7:12 says the law is holy, righteous, and good – it is a perfect reflection of who God is – and those who obey the law are blessed. David said, “I delight in your law, I meditate on it day and night.” The problem is that the people couldn’t keep the law – the law was good at setting the standard, but it could not empower people to live by those standards. Time after time Israel hardened their hearts and failed to keep God’s law.

The prophet Jeremiah predicted a day when God would intervene and make a new covenant with His people – one that is not written on tablets of stone, but on the tablet of the heart. Listen to Jeremiah’s incredible prophesy... “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 in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

One of the main differences between the old and new covenants is that God will bring about an inner change of heart so that we have the power and the desire to obey God. Ezekiel 36:26-27 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.”

The new covenant was inaugurated with the death of Jesus and was commemorated by Jesus at the Last Supper. The power Jesus promised to give came fifty days later when the Holy Spirit came upon the 120 gathered in the Upper Room. The main difference now for us who live under the New Covenant is that we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the game changer.

Listen again to verse 6... “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.” By “letter” Paul means the letters engraved on the tablets – the letters are the law of God. We are not of the letter, but of the Spirit. When we’re saved the Holy Spirit of God is poured into our hearts, giving us the power and ability to obey God.

“For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” Galatians 3:10 says, “All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.’” Paul says, “If you want to live by the law without the Spirit, you will be cursed. That’s because to have a righteous standing before God, you must not keep some of the law or part of the law, you must keep all of the law – every jot and tittle. You say, “There’s no way I can live up to all these laws. If I have to keep every law written in the book, I’m doomed.” This is exactly what the law was intended to do – to reveal our sin and inability to be perfectly obey God, and drive us to say, “I need a Savior.”

When you trust Christ to be your Savior, the Spirit of the living God comes to live in you and gives you a new heart – a new desire and motivation and power to obey God. You obey God not because you have to, but because you want to. You don’t obey God to earn favor with God, you obey Him because you love Him and want to please Him.

Paul’s point is this: We are competent, we are adequate, to minister for God, because we are ministers of the new covenant. We are not about getting people to obey rule and religious customs, we are about helping people come to faith in Christ and being completely transformed. We do not rely on our own power or skills or abilities, we rely on the transforming power of the Holy Spirit who changes hearts so that they might live to please God.

Do you have what it takes to go forth in Jesus’ name and spread the His message of salvation? The only qualification you need is to be willing and available to serve and value people – to help them come to know Christ and become a living letter changed by the Spirit of the Living God. And all you need in order to do the job is the power of God working in you and through you. We have something the world desperately needs, and by God’s grace and power, may we go forth in confidence as His ministers.