October 3/4, 2009

Ministers of a New Covenant

2 Corinthians 3:1-18

Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards

Pastor Bryan Clark

In 1993 some of the leaders from the Lincoln Berean Church contacted me and asked me if I would be interested in considering moving to Lincoln and becoming part of the staff here. The arrangement was that I would share some of the preaching and teaching and then work alongside of the senior pastor and maybe, possibly over five or six years, transition into the role of senior pastor. What appealed to me about that offer was the chance to work alongside someone I highly respected in ministry and to be trained and mentored—to grow as a leader. So I agreed to come. That was October of 1993; I was thirty-four years old. In a couple of months the senior pastor, Curt Lehman, was diagnosed with cancer and in less than a year I was voted on as the new senior pastor. I was absolutely overwhelmed; I felt I was totally inadequate for my calling. Here we are sixteen years later. I don't know that I was right about a lot of things in those days but one thing I was right about—I am totally inadequate for my calling. Don't laugh, because so are you. (Laughter) And we know that don't we? We feel that. We think about talking to a neighbor or a co-worker or carrying out the ministry that God has called us to and we feel that—we feel this sense of inadequacy because we are inadequate. So what do we do? How do we find a sense of confidence? How do we find a sense of strength and boldness?

That is what Paul wants to talk to us about today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to II Corinthians, Chapter 3. In thinking about II Corinthians, especially these early chapters, it's probably best just to ignore the chapter divisions—remembering those aren't inspired. They are put there by editors and this is just kind of a running train of thought and it is best to think of it that way. Last week at the end of chapter two Paul introduced us to a very graphic Roman imagery called the Roman Triumphal Entry where we painted the picture of Christ as the conquering general and us as the conquered slaves that come in with him—with the reminder that when the parade comes through town, there is only one who receives the applause and that is Christ Himself. Paul reminded us that when God smells us—when God smells us and our performance and our behavior—what He ultimately smells is the sweet aroma of Christ. Whether this past week you think you performed very well or whether you think you performed very poorly, when God smells you He doesn't smell your performance. He smells the sweet smell of Jesus and what He has done for you. Paul reminded us that Christ is the big divide between those who will experience eternal life and those who will experience eternal death, which raised the question: Who is adequate to be a messenger of this gospel? Paul said, "Well it's not the religious peddlers; it's those who are sincerely called of God." Now he is going to continue to discuss that subject.

Chapter 3, verse 1:

> **Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.** (*NASB, II Cor. 3:1-3)

It was very common in the first century that religious teachers carried with them a letter of commendation, a letter that was their credential for ministry. We know that the false teachers in Corinth were religious legalists. It is very likely they carried with them letters from Jerusalem that identified them as official messengers of the message. That served as their credentials. And it sounds like they are raising the question, "What are Paul's credentials? We'd like to see his letter." So Paul responds by saying, "Do we have to go through that again? My credential is that your lives have been radically changed by the Spirit of God through the power of the gospel." Paul lived with them for eighteen months. He delivered the message of power and their lives will never be the same. He says, "Hey that's my credential; you're the letter. The Spirit of God has written on your hearts that you have been radically changed." He's drawing a contrast between religion and the message of Jesus. The peddlers were peddling religion. Religion does have the ability to do a bit of remodeling—to put a little paint over certain areas and to produce external change temporarily. But only the Spirit of God, through the power of the gospel, has the power to change someone from the inside out. Therefore Paul says, "This isn't written in ink; it is the Spirit of God. This isn't a tablet of stone; this is someone's heart that has been radically changed. Those are the credentials." In other words what he is saying is that what makes us adequate is not ourselves—it's not the minister—it's the ministry of the *New Covenant*. It's not the messenger that's adequate; it's the message that's adequate. The adequacy is not in the individual but it's in the Spirit of God—in the power of the message of the New Covenant.

This whole idea of religious credentials has always been a problem in the church. In various denominations today you still have a strong emphasis on a *clergy class* and *everybody else*. We separate them out by titles; we separate them out by clothing; we separate them out as a clergy class and then everybody else. That looks much more similar to the Old Covenant than anything that appears in the New Covenant. The fact of the matter is in the New Covenant there is no such distinction. There is not a clergy class and everybody else. In order to be adequate for ministry you do not need to go to Bible college; you do not need to go to seminary; you do not need to be ordained and you do not have to have credentials. I am a licensed minister of the gospel. I have four college degrees. I have been at this for twenty-six years. None of that makes me adequate for ministry. The only thing that makes me adequate is the Spirit of God changing my heart and it's the power of the message. Adequacy is not in the minister; it's in the message. It's in the ministry of the New Covenant and that is what Paul is saying.

Verse 4:

> **And such confidence we have through Christ toward God.**

In other words the Corinthians might be saying, "Wow! He sounds really confident in his relationship with God." He says, "I am but it doesn't come from myself; it comes through Christ."

> **Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.** (Vs. 5-6)

Paul's very quick to say his adequacy comes from God and the adequacy comes from the fact that we have been called to be servants of a New Covenant—in other words messengers of the New Covenant. The Greek language has a couple of different words for *new*. This is a particular word that means *new* as contrasted with *old*, which is what we would expect, but also carries with it the idea of superiority. Not only is it new as compared to old but it is far superior to the old and that is

the argument Paul is going to make. In philosophical circles we would say, "He is going to argue from the *lesser* to the *greater* and what gives us adequacy is the message of the New Covenant." And then he gets very graphic in his terminology when he talks there about the fact that this is...**not of the letter, but of the Spirit**. And then he says...**the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life**. That certainly raises the question, "What is he talking about?" That's pretty graphic language.

Verse 7:

> **But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?** (Vs. 7-8)

All right, now the mystery of what he is talking about is gone. He is clearly referring to Exodus 34 when Moses went up Mount Sinai and received the *Law*. He came down with tablets that God had engraved. These laws became, in essence, the foundation of the Old Covenant. Paul refers to them as a **...ministry of death**. The law kills. He refers to it as a ministry of death, but he does say this was from God and there was **glory**. When Moses would come down the mount, his face would glow. He reflected the glory of God but—and Paul is quick to say and will say it two more times—the glory didn't last. There is great theology in the fact that the glory faded away. What God was trying to say is that the Old Covenant would not last. It would fade away and give way to a New Covenant that would be far more glorious. So Moses came down—had the glory—but the glory would fade as God's way of saying, "This is temporary. This covenant will serve a purpose and when the purpose has been completed, it will fade away and will be replaced by a *new*." He goes on to say, "If that's true of a covenant that faded away, how much more glory is there going to be in this New Covenant—that is a covenant of life, is a covenant of the Spirit." Again he is making the argument from the lesser to the greater.

Now one thing I want to bring up right here is the idea of the Ten Commandments. There is absolutely no question that the Ten Commandments are part of what's referred to here. They were on the tablets; it's what Moses came down with. Every statement here about the Old Testament Law must include the Ten Commandments. It kills; it's a ministry of death. We as Christians often talk about the Ten Commandments but theologically, I am not sure we get it. We want them in our parks. We want them in our courthouses. We want them in our schools, but somehow we pull them out and separate them from the Law. So I am just going to raise that question now and come back to it in a little bit.

Verse 9:

> **For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory.**

Again the language is graphic. The letter kills—it's a ministry of death. Now he is referring to it as a **...ministry of condemnation**. What is he talking about? This all goes to understanding the purpose of the Law. The Law, in essence, was the foundation of the Old Covenant. Everything in the Old Covenant was meant to point to the coming of a Savior. God had made a promise. We track it all the way back to Genesis, Chapter 3, where God promised through the seed of a woman would come one who would crush the head of the serpent. By the time we get to Genesis 15, we can make the case that it will be God himself who will become a man who will shed his blood to atone or to pay for our ability to keep the covenant. So all of the Old Covenant was pointing to the

fact that God had made a promise and the promise was that He would send a Savior. But there is a problem and the problem is that all of us, deep within us, have this desire to be our own god. It shows up in Genesis 3 and it shows up in our lives over and over again. Religion plays to that desire because religion tells you that you can do it yourself. Deep within us there is something that says, "I want to do it myself" and religion says you can. You just have to keep these rules. You just have to jump through these hoops. You just have to do this and that and you can make yourself good enough for God.

So God sent the Law. The purpose of the Law was never meant to be a means of salvation. Sometimes I hear people say, "Well people were saved one way in the Old Testament and another way in the New Testament. That is false—bad theology! The only difference is that people in the Old Testament were saved *looking forward* to the cross. People in the New Testament were saved *looking back* at the cross. In essence people in the Old Covenant were saved on credit—believing that God made a promise and He would keep His promise and He would send a Savior—and they died believing by faith that would be true. But the tendency we have—because we have this desire to be our own god—is to think that God grades on a curve. And so we tend to measure and compare ourselves and this is the problem with religion. Religious people convince themselves that by and large, "I'm better than most", and so surely God's going to grade on a curve and if anybody gets in, "I'll probably get in". So God sent the Law to say, "Whoa, whoa, wait a minute here. We're not going to do it that way and I'm not grading on a curve. Here's the standard—six hundred thirteen commandments—and this is what I want you to measure yourself up against. Unless you can keep every one of these perfectly—every day—you are condemned." He wanted people to understand that they could not do it themselves; therefore they needed a Savior. Therefore they would believe by faith that God will keep His promise and He would send a Savior. So it was a ministry of death; it was a ministry of condemnation. It was a constant reminder, "You don't measure up; you need help."

But Paul does remind us that covenant did come with glory. But if there was glory in a ministry of condemnation, how much greater is going to be the glory of a covenant of righteousness? Now Paul doesn't go back through and restate the gospel here. He's already done it several times to the Corinthians. Back to I Corinthians, Chapter 15, Paul states it clearly that Jesus—God in the flesh—died for our sins, was buried and rose again, that those who by faith believe Jesus died for me—He did for me what I could not do for myself and I believed that by faith—that on that basis, God forgives our sins and we are reconciled back into a relationship with God, both now and forever. Therefore my standing before God has nothing to do with my behavior. It has nothing to do with my religious performance. When God smells me He only smells the sweet smell of Jesus. Therefore it is a covenant of righteousness—meaning that on the basis of what Jesus did for me on the cross—today I stand *right* in the presence of God. Now you may have had a really good week; you may have had a terrible week spiritually. Either way you stand before God *right* today, because your standing is not on the basis of your performance but on the basis of what Jesus did for you on the cross. Therefore instead of a ministry of death, instead of a **...ministry of condemnation**, this is a **...ministry of righteousness**. This is good news filled with hope and life. Therefore, if the old had some glory, how much more glorious must this New Covenant be! And if the New Covenant is so much more glorious, why would anyone cling to the covenant of condemnation from the past? That's the argument that Paul is making.

> **For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.** (Vs. 10-11)

Paul is saying there that the New Covenant is so glorious it's as if the Old Covenant had no glory at all. The new is so superior that, by comparison, the old had no glory at all. He reminds us again that the old fades away but the glory of the new gets more glorious with each passing day. Now what Paul was dealing with were the false teachers in Corinth who were religious legalists. We sometimes refer to them as the *Judaizers*. These were not people who denied the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. These were people who believed and affirmed that, but they were quick to say, "But that's not enough". They were attempting to mesh the old with the new. "Okay we like the new, but we are not ready to let go of the old." So in the ancient world it was "Yes, Christ died for you, but you also need to be circumcised; you also need to keep the Sabbath; you also need to keep the yearly festivals and feasts." They were trying to mesh the old with the new and Paul is trying to make the case that the new is so vastly superior, why would you cling to the old? We have the same problem today where people seek to try to mesh something *to* the finished work of Jesus on the cross. We all know people and denominations that would affirm Jesus' death on the cross. They celebrate Christmas; they celebrate Easter. They say, "We believe all that. It is Christ and….Christ and baptism...Christ and communion...Christ and keeping the Sabbath...Christ and these legalistic rules and regulations." The tendency is to say, "As long as they get the death, burial, and resurrection thing right, then the rest of it doesn't really matter. I mean there is nothing wrong with being a little bit extra cautious and doing a few more things on the side." Paul totally disagrees with that. When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he said, "If you add one thing to the gospel, it ceases to be the gospel." This was the great divide of the Reformation: the belief that salvation is by Christ alone—nothing added.

Verse 12:

> **Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech,**

I would circle the **therefore** there, if you are inclined to write in your Bible, because he is saying, "Because this is true and because the new is so far more glorious than the old, therefore we move out with boldness; we move out with confidence; we move out with courage." Why? Because the minister is adequate? No...because the ministry is adequate—the ministry of the New Covenant. It's not the messenger that's adequate; it's the message that's adequate. So he says, "Because this is true we have a message of hope; we have a message of life; we have a message of righteousness; and that gives us our courage and our boldness. We just lay it out there and the rest is up to God and His Spirit."

> **...and we are not as Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away.** (Vs. 13)

Paul again is going back to Moses. Moses would put a veil over his face because the glory was fading away and he didn't want the people to see that it was fading away, so he would hide that. Paul says, "Hey we're not like that. The glory of the New Covenant isn't fading away; it becomes more glorious with each passing day."

> **But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts; but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.** (Vs. 14-16)

This is a real interesting part of this text. Paul is saying that Moses hid the fact that the glory was fading so that now all the way up until that moment in the first century when the Old Covenant is read, they failed to recognize that the Old Covenant has faded away. Its entire purpose was to point to the coming of the Messiah. Paul even told us that at the end of II Corinthians, Chapter 1, that Jesus is God's "Yes". Jesus was the fulfillment of everything that was promised but now the hearts and the minds of these Jews is veiled. They cannot see that the old has faded away and is now replaced by the glory of the new. Now that Jesus has come, what is the purpose of hanging onto the Old Covenant? Why would you settle for the old when something far superior has replaced it? He says, "The only way to be set free from that is in Christ. Only when someone is willing to accept that it's not on the basis of my religious performance, my ability to keep the Law, am I saved but rather it's on the basis of what Christ did for me on the cross. It's only then that the veil comes down and I see that that system that condemned me is gone and I am now entering into the life of the New Covenant which is a system of life and hope—a system of the Spirit."

Christ is the great divide. Every single person in this room this morning will make one of two choices: Either you believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and by faith you trust Christ alone or you say, "I will do it myself". There is no other option. Every other religious system is a way of saying, "I'll do this myself". Until we reach a point where we recognize that there's no religious stuff I can do; there's no amount of being good that's going to be good enough for God, but its only on the basis of what Christ did for me on the cross—it's only when we get to that point— that the veil is lifted and we see clearly that the old is gone and the new has come in Christ.

Verse 17:

> **Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.** (Vs. 17-18)

Paul reminds us that the Spirit of God who dwells within us is God Himself and where there is the Spirit, there is liberty—there is freedom. What he is saying there is the only way to be set free from the pressure and the anxiety and the condemnation from a religious system of performance is through Christ. If you have the Spirit of God, there is only one reason and that's because you have trusted Christ as Savior. If you have the Spirit, there is liberty—there is freedom.

The old system of the Law—the system of religious performance, the system of legalism—is a system of death; it is a system of condemnation. It is a system of darkness because every day you live in the reality that you may not be good enough today. Every day you live with that pressure and it never goes away. Even though I am trying to be good, I don't know today if I'm good enough. So it's filled with fear and it's filled with anxiety. It's filled with this sense of pressure every day to measure up, hoping you make it *in*, if God grades on the curve. But when you understand that you can't be good enough—that's why Jesus died in your place on the cross—and when you believe, by faith, Jesus did that for me, there is freedom. No more religious performance, no more pressure, no more fear and anxiety of wondering every day if I'm going to measure up.

On those days when I completely stink up the place—and I have plenty of them—I take solace in the fact that when God smells me, He only smells the aroma of Christ. I stand righteous before Him. The pressure is off; I have been set free. He reminds us that the Spirit is in the process of transforming us into the image of Christ. He says we do this **...with unveiled face**. Moses had to hide his face because the glory was fading. Our glory isn't fading. It's becoming more glorious

with each passing day. It will never fade. From glory to glory, it's becoming stronger and stronger as the Spirit of God is transforming me more and more into the image of Christ. That word, *transforming* is the Greek word from which we get our English word *metamorphosis*. The Spirit of God is "*metamorphosizing"* me on a daily basis—making me more and more like Jesus. The glory is getting greater, not less. But notice carefully the text; this is not something *you* are doing. It is something the Spirit of God is doing *in you* and *for you*. There is nothing you can do today to make yourself more spiritual. There is nothing you can do today to make yourself more acceptable to God. There is nothing you can do today to make yourself more righteous. It is all being done for you on the basis of what Christ did for you on the cross. All God asks of us is that we would seek to live in alignment with what's true of us in Christ—that we would live like we actually believe that.

So let's go back to our discussion of the Ten Commandments. A lot of Christians try and make the case that the Ten Commandments are still in effect today. But what is your biblical basis for somehow pulling them out of the Law and saying somehow that what was said in II Corinthian 3 doesn't apply to them? Of course it applies! That's the very thing Moses went up and received on the tablets and brought back. It's a ministry of death; it's a ministry of condemnation. So what are we saying? The Ten Commandments are out and we can live as we please? The answer is yes / no. They are out—they were part of the law; they have faded with the glory of the law—but the Ten Commandments reflect the moral character of God. Now what we have is rather than externally trying to uphold a standard, we have the very person of God dwelling within us—*metamorphosizing* us into the image of Christ. Therefore the moral character of God does not change and, since the Spirit of God is living within me, the Spirit of God is changing me—*metamorphosizing* me to live in alignment with the moral character of God. Therefore, under the Spirit of God, do I go out and violate those? Of course not! I would be violating the very character of God. But now it's from the inside out. Now it's in alignment with the Spirit of God who's molding and shaping me into the image of God.

Some people try to make the case that the Ten Commandments are still in effect in order to support the idea of a New Covenant Sabbath. As a matter of fact some of you maybe have been asked the question, "Why don't you keep the Sabbath?" and you look through the Ten Commandments and you wonder, "Well, boy that's really a hard question to answer." Number One: Ten Commandments–OUT. Number Two is understanding the Sabbath. The whole purpose of the Sabbath—like the whole of the Old Covenant—was to point to the coming of a Messiah, the promised Savior. So the concept was this: On the Sabbath God works; I rest. It goes all the way back to creation when God created; then he rested and Adam and Eve entered into His rest. Even before sin entered into the picture God demonstrated grace. He did the work; we just enter into it. But the Law of the Sabbath is not in Genesis; it's in the Law. But the purpose of the Law was God works; I rest. That was completed when Jesus died on the cross. He did the work for me and I rest in the finished work of Jesus. Therefore when people say to me, "Do you keep the Sabbath?" I say, "Yes I do". "Well what day is it?" "Well it's today." "You mean Sunday?" "No, it's today. Ask me on Tuesday and I will say, 'Today'; ask me on a Friday and I will say, 'Today'. Every day I live in the finished work of Jesus on the cross. He worked; I rested."

We make a tremendous mistake when we try to make the case that Sunday is the New Covenant Sabbath. This is not about whether or not you mow your lawn on Sunday—that's just bad theology. Sunday is not the New Covenant Sabbath. Salvation is the New Covenant Sabbath. We live in the finished work of Jesus. He worked; I rest.

The Old Covenant—the covenant of law, the covenant of legalism, the covenant of religious performance, the covenant that reminded these people that you need help; you need a Savior—has faded as it has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus. Jesus was God's "Yes". He kept His promise. But now that the new has come, the old has faded away. Why would we hang on to the old that has faded away when the new is vastly superior? God, now in Christ, has made a way of salvation so that even on those days when I perform poorly, I stand *right* in the presence of God. I have been absolutely set free from religious performance, from anxiety and fear, wondering every day if I am going to measure up for God. It is the Spirit of God within me who is *metamorphosizing* me on a daily basis to make me more and more like Jesus and, rather than the glory fading, the glory is getting greater with each passing day and will culminate in the presence of Jesus. Compared to the New Covenant, the Old Covenant had no glory at all. What a magnificent message! Our adequacy is not in the minister; it's in the ministry of the New Covenant. Our adequacy is not in the messenger; it's in the message—the message of the power of the Spirit of God and the life-changing message of the gospel. Paul reminds us of this magnificent message of liberty, this message of hope, this message of freedom, this message that allows us to stand *right* in the presence of a holy God. What an awesome message that is!

Our Father, we are thankful this morning that when we were lost in our sin, Christ died for us. Lord, we are thankful that the Spirit of God dwells within us, metamorphosizing us on a daily basis into the image of Christ. Lord, I know there are people here today that have been up to their eyebrows in religion. They thought that if they were really good religious people, that you would find them acceptable. Lord, that's an evidence that the veil has blinded their eyes, has blinded their mind. They don't realize that's a system of condemnation; that's a system of death. That system kills. Lord, my prayer would be this morning that you would lift that veil, that they would understand that Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves and that in trusting Christ as Savior, they receive this Spirit and, where this Spirit is, then there is freedom. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen

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October 3/4, 2009

Ministers of a New Covenant

2 Corinthians 3:1-18

Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. Do you feel adequate or inadequate for your calling as a Christian? Which should you feel and why?

2. Why does legalism lead to bondage?

3. What has been your experience with people and churches trying to mix "law" with grace? What was the result?

Bible Study

1. Review the Roman Triumphal Entry from 2:14. What was the imagery? Compare with I Corinthians 4:7.

2. Read II Corinthians 3:1-18. According to 3:1-3 what is the difference between religious performance and a "letter of Christ?"

3. What is the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant? What is the difference between legalism and grace?

4. What is Paul's argument for embracing the new and not clinging to the old? What is included in the "old" fading covenant? 10 commandments? Sabbath? Dietary laws?

5. According to Paul, what gives us boldness in sharing the Gospel (v. 12)? Is Paul's confidence in the message or the messenger?

6. What is Paul's point about the people's hearts being "veiled?" In what ways do we struggle today to see that the old has faded and the new has come?

7. Why does Paul say there is "liberty in the Spirit?" In what ways has this been true for you?

Application

1. According to Paul what should give you confidence to fulfill your calling? How does this take the pressure off and set you free?

2. Are there areas where you tend to mix the old with the new? In other words, do you struggle with legalism in some areas? What does Paul share in this text that might help you move beyond that legalism to freedom?

3. According to Paul, list your credentials for ministry? Is there really any excuse why God can't use you in a significant way to change the world?

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