MINISTERS OF A NEW COVENANT

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

Key Verse: 3:6

“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.”

In chapter 2, Paul said, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life” (2:14-16). How important the role of the aroma of Christ is! Through the aroma Christ God spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ. This role or task is related to one’s life or death eternally by being a saver of life or a saver of death in eternity. So Paul raises a question, “Who is equal to such a task?” Here the word equal is in Greek *hikanos* meaning “sufficient,” “competent,” or “capable.” He gives the answer to this question in chapter 3, saying in verse 6, “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant…” Paul in the whole 2 Corinthians defends his apostleship to protect God’s flock in Corinth from false teachers, who undermined the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ, which is the gospel, so as to destroy the genuine work of God for the salvation of perishing souls. In this passage, we can think of the life of ministers of the new covenant and the essence of the new covenant.

**First, a letter from Christ (1-3).** Paul starts this chapter by raising two questions, “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?” These two are the questions that demand an answer “no.” Here when Paul said, “we” and “ourselves”, he is using editorial plural to speak modestly. These two questions are concerning Paul himself and his own life. Paul had written in 1 Corinthians 14-17, “…Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel…I am sending to you Timothy…He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus…” And he said in 2 Corinthians 1:12, “Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God.” The Corinthians had seen Paul’s life as a shepherd and a gospel servant. Paul was a spiritual father to them in the gospel and the relationship was based on holiness and godly sincerity in God’s grace, different from the relationship in the world. They could not deny Paul’s way of life in Christ.

And about letters of recommendation, some people like Judaizers, had such letters from an established authority, probably from Jerusalem church to infiltrate Gentile churches and impose circumcision on people as a requirement for salvation. Letters of recommendation are the second-hand testimony. Yet, they valued such human recognition highly. As for Paul he said in 1 Thessalonians 2:4, “…we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.” He also said in 1 Corinthians 4:3-4. “I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.” Paul testified that he lived to please God and win God’s approval, looking for the day of judgment when the Lord comes. Certainly, Paul did not ignore the church of Jerusalem. He said in Galatians 2:9, “James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews.” He even had plan to bring offerings of the Gentile churches to help the poor saints in Jerusalem church. Paul like some people does not need any letters of recommendation from any human institution to the Corinthians or from the Corinthians to go to other churches.

Subsequently Paul says in verse 2, “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone.” Here Paul says, “You yourselves are our letter,” implying I have a better letter. It is because they were saved and sanctified through Paul’s preaching and ministering to them. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, “Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterous nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 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.” Behind such precious work of God was Paul’s whole-hearted and long-suffering patient serving. So they are a visible letter of Paul. Paul also says here, “…written on our hearts.” In fact, Paul had a letter that was written in his heart. Paul would carry the letter with him, not in his pocket or in his luggage but in his heart. Paul would never forget them, but keep them in his heart. He says in 2 Corinthians 7:3, “…I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you.” Truly this is the most beautiful relationship in the world. And Paul says further in verse 2, “known and read by everyone.” This is a visible open letter that everybody who ever met one of those believers at Corinth could see and hear and understand the transformation.

And then Paul says in verse 3, “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…” Now Paul declares that they are not just a letter on a human level, but a letter from Christ. The author of the letter is Christ Jesus, put down and delivered by Paul (ESV; NASB) as the fruit of the ministry. And “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God”, it indicates that the letter written in ink is fading and dead, but the letter written with the Spirit of the living God is alive. This is a living letter, for the Spirit of the living God worked in them and continually works as God is living. Paul’s argument is great with the deep understanding of the undeniable work of God in the Corinthians, from no need of commending themselves and also no need of letters of recommendation to Corinthians being his own letter and a letter from Christ.

Yet, Paul goes further in this defence concerning a letter from Christ, “not on tablets of stone but on the tablets of human hearts.” Here we are reminded of the two tables of the Testimony, Ten Commandments, the tables of stone inscribed by the finger of God (Ex. 31:18). That was external. But this letter written on the tablets of human hearts is internal. The Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, the Israelites could not keep them. Even they could not wait even for Moses to come down from the Mt. Sinai with the two stones of the Testimony from God, and indulged in idol worship, making the god of a golden calf. Moses burned with anger and he threw the tablets. The history of Israelites was the history of breaking the law of God. But what is written in the tablets of human hearts is different. Ezekiel 11:19-20 says, “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. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.” It is written again in Ezekiel 36:26-27, “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.” How can it work? When people repent and accept Jesus who died for their sins and rose again from the dead, God give them a heart of stone, removing the heart of stone. The Holy Spirit dwells in the heart and enables them to keep the laws. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:14, “…one died for all, and therefore all died.” When Christ died, he paid the debt of sin for all. And in his death all died. So Paul said in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ. I no longer live but Christ lives in me.” Yes, this is the confession of Paul, yet it is to be the confession of every true believer. With the death of Christ, I myself, that is my old self, have been crucified, to say that I no longer live but Christ lives in me. Paul continues, “The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” Here, we are to notice two things: who loved and to what extent. The Son of God loved me to the point of giving himself by crucifixion. The Son of God loved me as if I am the only one to love in this world. This is true for the Bible testifies to it. This love transcends all human love. God wants each of us to hold fast this love and live by faith in him.

And Paul says in Galatians 5:16, 18, “Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature…If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” In the life of believers, the cross and the Spirit work together. The cross of Jesus softens the heart and the Holy Spirit lead them to obedience to the words of God. So how precious a letter from Christ is, written by the Spirit of the living God and on the tablets of human hearts. We learn that we should serve God’s flock of sheep until each one becomes a letter from God.

**Second, ministers of a new covenant (4-6).** Verse 4 says, “Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God.” In the ESV, “Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.” How important one’s confidence is in doing the work of God. Without confidence we cannot truly serve him. Yet, this is not self-confidence. Most probably the false prophets who tried to undermine Paul had self-confidence. Those who have self-confidence turn out to be enemies of God. Paul’s confidence is through Christ before God and toward God. Without this confidence he would have given up his life of mission, being destroyed by all the slanderers and attackers of him. From the beginning of 1 and 2 Corinthians, he said, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” He had confidence in God’s calling and God’s will for him. He had confidence in the gospel and the gospel work of Christ through the Spirit of the living God.

Then in verse 5 Paul says, “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.” Here again competence is sufficiency and capability. And here “to claim anything for ourselves” is “to consider anything as having come from ourselves” (NASB). It is clear to Paul that competence comes from God as he humbly depends on the power of God.

He then says in 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.” The competence is being ministers of a new covenant. Let’s think more about a new covenant. Jeremiah 31:31-34 says, “‘The time is coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers 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 house 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. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,’ declares the LORD. ‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’” This is concerning the new covenant. The promise in this new covenant is, “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” How can it be possible? At the last supper Jesus said to his disciples, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28). In Luke’s gospel he said, “This is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” In this, Jesus revealed that the forgiveness of sin is done through the blood of Christ. The promise in the old covenant is this written in Leviticus 18:5, “Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them.” And 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.” Anyone who relies on observing the law is cursed, which means eternal damnation. So Paul rebukes Galatians, “Are you so foolish? After beginning by the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” Again, observing the law or all human effort puts man under a curse, eternal condemnation. These are concerning the promise in the old covenant. But the promise in the new covenant is forgiveness of sins through Christ’s blood. No animal’s blood nor any man’s blood can take away the sins of man for the forgiveness, but the innocent blood of Jesus. Hebrews 10:4 says, “…it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins,” and 9:27 says, “…without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” And 1 Peter 1:18-19 says, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”

In Leviticus chapter 4, in the case of a sin offering, a bull or a goat was slaughtered and its blood is sprinkled seven times on a curtain of the sanctuary (4:11 17), that is between the Holy Place and the most Holy Place, and the blood was dripping from the curtain. According to Hebrews 10:20, the curtain is Jesus’ body. We can imagine how Jesus shed his blood: the blood oozing out of his shoulders and back at the time of flogging, his sweat being like drops of blood falling to the ground in his intense prayer at Gethsemane, blood flowing down his face because of the crown of thorns on his head and strikes by a staff, blood gushing out of his stretched hands and feet nailed on the cross, and the sudden flow of water and blood from his pierced side. Jesus shed all his blood without sparing even one drop of blood. Indeed, he poured out his blood for the forgiveness of our sins – the sin of lust, pleasure-seeking, pride, self-centredness, thoughtlessness, fatalism, fear and worry, etc.

Last November M. Sarah was injured on her right leg and she could not walk without a crutch. Soon she would walk without it, but she was not able to bend her knee and kneel down to pray for more than five months. Then she was hurt again on the same spot last Monday. We don’t want our loved ones to suffer. We are unwilling for our children to suffer in any way. But Jesus was willing to suffer even in such a way in obedience to the will of God. According to Hebrews 10:5-10, Jesus knew that God was not pleased with sacrifice and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings. So he said, “Here I am, I have come to do you will” and was willing to offer his body as a sacrifice for the sins of man. Praise Jesus!

The new covenant is written in the Old Testament, but also written in the New Testament. The author of Hebrews quoted Jeremiah 31:31-34 in Hebrews 8:8-12, “The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” The description is almost same. Here we are to know that God has never made a covenant with Gentiles, but with the Israelites. However, the Gentiles are the sharers of the covenant. Paul says in Ephesians 3:6, “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” What a grace! Then the author of Hebrews writes once more in 10:16-17, the short quotation of Jeremiah 31:33-34, “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.’ Then he adds: ‘Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.’” This time “with them” meaning “with the Jews and Gentiles” in the context. Two things are reiterated, God’s putting his laws in their hearts and forgiving sins.

As we studied in Luke 24:47, the risen Jesus commissioned his disciples, saying, “repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” God prepared everything for the forgiveness of sins. What God wants from men is repentance. He desires our repentance. Peter said in 2 Peter 3:9 that God does not want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” Paul said in Acts 20:21, “…they must turn to the God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Repentance pleases God.

We have been praying for Sara’s situation for the last two and half years. I believed that as we prayed, we would see the glory of God, holding to John 11:40, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” But I found that unbelief was lingering in my heart and I had to repent. I realize anew that unbelief is a wicked sin, as wicked as an immortal sin, probably even more wicked. I repented of my unbelief. God had mercy on me to renew my faith in the grace of the forgiveness sins. God wants from us is repentance so that we can live in his grace of forgiveness of sins and experience and his power and glory. Thank God for the new covenant, “I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more.”

In Hebrews 1,1 there are heroes and heroines of faith. But they were saved also by their faith in the new covenant, looking forward to it. Therefore Hebrews 11:40 says, “God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.” Being made perfect refers to salvation as Hebrews 10:10 says, “…we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all,” and 10:14 says, “because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”

Paul continued in verse 6, “not of the letter but of the Spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” We really need to understand this. Romans 7: 6 says, “But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.” Here “the written code” is the same as “the letter’, which is in Greek *gramma*. It is also written in Romans 2:29, “No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit not by the written code.” So here, the letter is not merely the law. The letter is an interpretation of the law that strips it of its moral spiritual content and makes it purely external. The letter leads people to death. Legalism leads to a deadened life. But the Spirit gives life. So ministers of a new covenant are ministers of a new covenant of the Spirit, not of the letter. How precious ministers of a new covenant is!

Thank God for making us his covenant people sealed in the blood of Christ. May we live as his covenant people by the Spirit and have competence in God as ministers of a covenant of the Spirit.