

MINISTERS OF A NEW COVENANT PART 3: OUR SUFFICIENCY FOR THE TASK

2 Corinthians 2:17-3:6

Stonebrook Sunday AM, 2/9/20, Matt Heerema

Please turn with me to 2 Corinthians chapter 2. We're picking up our series on Paul's explanation of the new covenant ministry. If you remember back to two weeks ago we said that ministry, for the Christian, is service in a specific task: "the ministry of reconciliation" - that is, that God has reconciled people to himself through Christ, and we are here as ambassadors to announce that good news.

Now I don't know about you, but I often times feel completely insufficient for the task of announcing the good news. I often feel that there is very little chance that I'm going to manage to convince anyone of their need for a savior, and there is every chance that I am in fact going to mess something up and offend them, such that they never want to talk to me again. Do you ever feel this way?

So hear your pastor confess that I often experience a lot of doubt and lack confidence when an opportunity presents itself to share the good news of what God has done through Jesus.

Thankfully for us, today's passage addresses this.

Here's the point of today's passage: **Christians can have confidence for this ministry when they realize that God's Word is sufficient for accomplishing the task, and so speak it with sincerity and boldness.**

Read with me, we're going to pick the series back up mid-stream in chapter 2 verse 16.

2 Corinthians 2:16-3:6 (ESV)

...[to some we are] a fragrance from death to death, to [others] a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered 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.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

I have four words for us today, four major concepts in today's~ passage, that if we rightly understand, will help us have confidence in this task, this ministry, that God has given us.

Sincerity, Commendation, Confidence, Sufficiency.

If we have a right view of these four things, we'll not only have confidence for our own ministry, but we'll be able to grow in discernment about which other teachers out there we should be listening to.

Paul was doing two things here: he was proving the authenticity of his own ministry, and he was providing a model for the church so that they could engage in authentic ministry.

Let's look at sincerity first.

SINCERITY

2 Corinthians 2:16-17 (ESV)

16 ...[to some we are] a fragrance from death to death, to [others] a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? 17 For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of **sincerity**, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

Sincere is one of those words like "faith" or "belief" that has taken on a meaning that is more sentimental than is intended here. Sincerity has often been used as an excuse for poor performance at work, or worse inaccurate handling of God's word. "Oh, don't criticize him, he was being sincere." Well, to that, famous author Fyodor Dostoevsky says:

"You can be sincere and still be stupid."

That's not the kind of sincerity Paul is talking about. He doesn't have a sentimental sincerity in mind. He is contrasting sincerity with peddlers, or in our modern parlance: advertising. Selling by means of dishonesty.

The word sincerity here is an interesting one. I don't often get into Greek because we don't often need it to get the plain meaning of the text, but I think here it offers us a really good illustration.

The word translated as "sincerity" is "*helikrineias*" from "*helios*" (sun/daylight) and "*krino*" (to judge) - He's talking about judged in broad daylight.

(Quick helpful hint: in bible word studies, we have to be cautious with root words. They don't always bear on the meaning of the word. For example: "butterfly" - is not a fly made out of butter. But this particular example is pretty well supported elsewhere.)

So Paul says, "See exactly who I am in the full light of day. See everything about me and my message. I have nothing to hide. Audit me! Examine every nook and cranny."

And then makes an astonishing claim! "We are from God. The words we speak are from God himself, pure and simple. God as my witness and judge, everything I say is true. I have nothing to hide, and I'm not out for personal gain."

Two application points for us on this point:

1. Only receive teachers who teach God's word accurately, and do not pursue financial gain or fame from it.
2. In ministry, your task is to proclaim God's word accurately and from the heart, and not for personal gain.

Next: commendation.

COMMENDATION

2 Corinthians 3:1-3 (ESV)

3:1 Are we beginning to **commend** ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? 2 You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. 3 And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered 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.

Just a few thoughts here. It seems that in Paul's absence, false teachers have risen up in the Corinthian church, and were attempting to undermine his ministry. This is one of the purposes for which he wrote the letter. One of the criticisms, apparently, were lack of credentials. "Who is this Paul person? See my fancy degrees and qualifications?"

To which Paul answers: "You know me. And did your life change when you received the gospel from me, or did it not? You want proof that my message is an accurate one? Look at the results. "

[Kitchen Nightmares Illustration]

Flashy, exciting ministry are not the hallmarks of authenticity. One is not a true teacher by virtue of their ability to sway a crowd, or their credentials, their financial success, or anything else. The authenticity of Paul's ministry was proven by the fact that the Holy Spirit used it to change the hearts of the Corinthian believers.

Now, there's an important difference between Paul and us here. Paul was an authentic apostle, and the instruction he wrote down in his letters, that we have here in the bible, were inerrant. Everything here is true, and the word of God. Our situation, however, is a few steps removed from that. We have to accurately interpret the original language, we have to accurately understand what is being said, and we have to accurately apply that. Paul was doing that automatically because he was an apostle. That is not our situation. We need to work together as a church with our various gifts to carry this out correctly.

Now on the other side of this thought, the message *is understandable*. Any of us who desire to accurately understand God's word, and not to twist it for personal gain, can do so! The plain message is actually easy to understand. The harder stuff, we need to have more humility with, but is also understandable. Do not be intimidated. It can be hard work, but its God's words to us we're talking about! Isn't the work worth it?

Some application:

1. Do not be swayed by those who distort the plain message and point to their academic pedigree, great wealth, or especially make a big deal out of some "special anointing" from the holy spirit! And if they are on TV or are a bestselling author, be doubly cautious.
2. Do not feel disqualified from ministry due to the lack of an academic credential. The plain statement of the plain gospel message is what we are tasked with. The commendation we need, the credentials we need, come from whether or not we are speaking God's word accurately.

Our final two words go together.

CONFIDENCE AND SUFFICIENCY

2 Corinthians 3:4-6 (ESV)

4 Such is the **confidence** that we have through Christ toward God. 5 Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our **sufficiency** is from God, 6 who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant...

Paul is finally answering the question he raised back in 2:16. "Who is sufficient for these things?"

I mentioned at the beginning that I often don't feel adequate for ministry. It's true just as much when I think about sharing the gospel with a neighbor or friend as it is with writing a sermon. How on earth am I going to communicate the glorious eternal truths God has graciously given us to my church?! My words are far too meager, my skill is far too low!

But, I've been doing this long enough now that I have seen God come through for me time and time again, even when, and maybe especially when I feel like the sermon falls flat, as long as I'm opening God's word for you, I can have confidence that he's going to do something with it! We actually have that promise in the scriptures. God told the prophet Isaiah:

Isaiah 55:10-11 (ESV)

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

It doesn't matter my skill level. We can have confidence in ministry that doesn't come from our skill, our craftiness, our cleverness, our ability to really speak to felt needs, or really make things "relevant" - why does Paul say he has confidence? "Not because we are sufficient in ourselves... ..but our sufficiency is from God..."

We don't need to tamper with God's word. It is effective. We don't need to try and be cool, or impressive... ..our services don't need to be "lit" (or whatever the kids are saying these days... .. you guys know that means "high on drugs", right? Whatever.)

Paul started his first letter to the Corinthians by saying that it wasn't up to human wisdom or intelligence. He said "Neither the one who sows nor waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth..." - Our credentials and our confidence - both come from God, not our strength.

How does Paul say God makes us sufficient? Back to verse 17, and forward to chapter 4, its by the plain statement of His Words that our ministry is able effective.

Christians, we can have confidence for this ministry when we realize that God's Word is sufficient for accomplishing the task, and so speak it with sincerity and boldness.

[Example: Conversations at work, in the neighborhood. Commiseration and platitudes vs. sincere and compassionate sharing of the truth of God's word.]

So our final applications for today:

1. Christians, **realize you have a ministry** from God: sharing the truth that he has reconciled sinners to himself through Jesus's work on the Cross. You are an ambassador!
2. **Have confidence in that ministry**, because God has given you everything you need for it in his word. His word is sufficient for the work he wants you to do.
3. **Be sincere in your ministry**. Plainly state the honest truth. Don't try and hide it, don't worry about being a gospel ninja. Plainly, sincerely, state the truth, with genuine care and concern for the person you are sharing it with. Help them to know you care, and then tell them what you know about Jesus.

Let's Pray.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. WHERE HAS GOD PLACED YOU IN LIFE (WORKPLACE, HOME, NEIGHBORHOOD, CLASSROOM) SO THAT YOU CAN BE A MINISTER IN THE WAY WE'VE BEEN DISCUSSING?

How can you grow in faithfulness and effectiveness in the task God has given us: sharing the news about what he's done for mankind through Christ, in those contexts?

What roadblocks tend to keep you back from engaging in the ministry God has given us?

What is a practical step you can take this week to be more prepared for this ministry?