

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 3, 2006
2 Corinthians 3:4-11

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Jesus Enables Pastors to be Confident

1. He makes us equal to the task
2. He entrusts us with his glorious gospel

NIV 2 Corinthians 3:4 Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God.⁵ Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.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.⁷ Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was,⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?⁹ If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!¹⁰ For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory.¹¹ And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

Dear Christian Friends,

Competence and confidence are closely connected. When I know how to do what needs to be done, I'm confident. On the other hand, if I don't believe I'm able to do something, I'm not likely to be confident about it. In high school I worked at a shoe store. I started out by working in the stockroom, but one busy day the manager asked me to help on the sales floor. I had never done that before and wasn't sure I knew how. My misgivings increased when I saw that my first "customer" was a toddler sitting in her mother's lap. As I recall, I had some trouble determining the right size shoe for the child. When I found it, there was still the matter of getting the shoe on the baby. She was wiggling and her feet were a moving target. Finally, I managed to get one shoe on her. I pulled my hands away to look at the fit and saw that since I hadn't washed my hands after working in the stockroom, the new white shoe was now covered with dark smudges from my hands. Needless to say, it wasn't a boost for my confidence about selling shoes. But after I did it a few more times, I began to feel more competent and thus more confident.

What about competence and confidence when it comes to being a pastor? Is it simply a matter of having the right gifts enhanced by some good training and a bit of on-the-job experience? Not according to the apostle Paul. Here in 2 Corinthians he has to spend quite a bit of time defending his ministry. It's a safe guess that one of things his detractors said about him was that he was incompetent. Now Paul had never laid claim to being eloquent or physically impressive. And he insisted that his gospel ministry was about the message, not about the messenger. But he will not allow the charge of

incompetence to stand. He is competent as a minister of Christ because his competence comes from God. This competence, in turn, enables him to be confident in his ministry. So, following the apostle's lead this morning, we say that **Jesus Enables Pastors to be Confident**. There are two main reasons for this confidence: 1) Jesus makes us equal to the task, and 2) Jesus entrusts us with his glorious gospel.

1. Jesus makes us equal to the task

Paul writes here, "*Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.*" As I mentioned, Paul had his detractors in Corinth. Just a few verses earlier he had mentioned a challenge of the public ministry that wasn't unique to Corinth. He wrote, "**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. And who is equal to such a task?**" (2:15-16) The word "equal" here is the same word translated "competent" in chapter 3. Who is competent to be a minister of Christ? Who is equal to being the fragrance of life to some people, but the smell of death to others?

If that question had to be answered just on the basis of his own abilities, Paul would have said, "Not I." In and of himself he would not lay claim to being equal to the challenges of his ministry. A bit later in this letter he compares himself to a jar of clay, fragile and with no strength of his own. Martin Luther thought the same way. In his "Sacristy Prayer," he wrote: *Lord God, you have appointed me as a bishop and pastor in your church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything a long time ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument—but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.*

Competence, then, is not something that comes from inside the minister. It comes from God. Those he calls, he also equips. Those he sends, he also sustains. Competence and confidence come from God. That's as true today as it was in Paul's day.

Now about the equipping of those he calls to be his ministers, Paul writes, "*(God) has made us competent as ministers of the new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*" The old covenant was the covenant God made with the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai. That covenant, like most covenants, was a two-sided agreement, in this case between God and Israel. God said to Israel, "**If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.**" (Ex. 19:5) But that covenant made at Sinai proved fragile. God did his part, but the people of Israel continually disobeyed and broke that old covenant. But God didn't leave it at that. He established a "new covenant." This new covenant is a one-sided covenant of grace. It depends not on our obedience but solely on God's mercy. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God spoke of this new covenant in this way: "**For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.**" (31:34) Forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake is at the heart of the new covenant.

Now you see why Paul is able to claim competence and confidence. He is a minister of the new covenant, that is, he is a minister of the gospel. He is a mouthpiece of God's grace. His ministry is not ultimately about the letter, that is, the law—"Do this!" and "Don't do that!" Instead, his is a life-giving ministry of the Holy Spirit, who works through the gospel to create and sustain new spiritual life. That's the basis for his competence. And the power God has given to the gospel makes for confidence. Paul believed that the gospel is God's power for the salvation of everyone who believes. In 1 Corinthians he said, **"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."** (1:18) Paul himself had experienced the power of the gospel to convert. He had seen repeatedly in his ministry the gospel's power to save the lost from spiritual and eternal death. Therefore, armed with the gospel of Jesus Christ, he is both competent and confident.

We can have the same confidence inspired by the gospel today. The gospel message is that Jesus Christ, God's Son, has redeemed us from sin and death. He died for us and rose again. All who believe in him have full forgiveness of sins and life eternal. But then you wonder why it is that so much of what passes for the Christian message is law-oriented, almost to the exclusion of the gospel. A few years back, the *Prayer of Jabez* was the hot book. Pray this way, the author said, and God will bless you. Do you hear the law in that premise? "Do this!" And you remember the popularity of the "What Would Jesus Do?" bracelets. The idea was to learn to ask yourself, "What would Jesus do in this situation?" But that, too, is a law message. Rather than reminding us what Jesus *has done*, "What Would Jesus Do?" disguises a command: "You should do what Jesus did!" More recently, the book *The Purpose Driven Life* has sold millions and millions of copies. I know that some of you have read this book, too. But would you do this for me? Take another look at the book and as you do, mark the places where the book tells you what Christ has done for you. There are some. But then look also for those places where the book tells you what God commands you to do. I think you'll find many more examples of the law. It's because God knows how easily the message we Christians proclaim can become law-oriented, or even law dominant, that Paul here reminds us that Jesus has entrusted us with his glorious gospel.

To understand this next section of our text it will be helpful to review what happened in Exodus 19 and 34. Exodus 19 is where God descended to Mt. Sinai in a thick cloud. Smoke billowed from the mountain as the LORD came down to meet with Moses. There was thunder and lightning and the loud blast of a trumpet. In Exodus 34 Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai (the second time) with the Ten Commandments. Because he had been speaking with the LORD, Moses' face was radiant. In fact, the radiance of Moses' face made his own brother, Aaron, afraid to approach him. But Moses told Aaron and the people to come and he gave them the commands the LORD had given him on Mt. Sinai. But each time he'd finished speaking with the people, he would put a veil over his face. He'd only take the veil off to enter the LORD's presence or to speak to the people. Now in our next section, Paul is going to use this account from Exodus to make a point about the glory of the gospel of Jesus.

2. Jesus entrusts us with his glorious gospel

Paul writes, here, *“Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved with letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?”* There was no doubting that the message God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai was glorious. God had delivered it to Moses in person and Moses’ face reflected his run-in with the glory of God. It was a glorious message. How could it be otherwise, if it came from the Lord of glory? It was also a gracious message, in that the God who had brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, now wanted to forge a permanent relationship with his people and pour out blessings upon them.

But in these verses, Paul points out that the law of Moses, as glorious as it was, is not nearly as glorious as the new covenant of grace. For one, the old covenant brought death. The Israelites couldn’t keep it perfectly. In fact, there were so many commands—and the Israelites were so weakened by their sinful nature—that time and again they disobeyed. Why, before Moses had ever gotten down the mountain with the Ten Commandments, the Israelites were already committing idolatry by worshiping a golden calf. The penalty for infractions against the Old Covenant was death. The law pronounced its own condemnation: **“Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out.”** (Deut. 27:26) The new covenant, on the other hand, is God’s means to give us his righteousness and eternal life.

There are more contrasts between the old covenant and the new, between the law and the gospel. Rather than threatening punishment, the gospel offers forgiveness through Jesus, who suffered our punishment for us. The law condemns; the gospel declares us righteous. Rather than telling us that we deserve to go to hell, the gospel announces that all undeserved God has given us eternal life in heaven. Instead of telling us what to do, the gospel tells us what Jesus has done. And, while the glory of the old covenant faded away, as indicated in the fading glory of the face of Moses, the glory of the new covenant remains forever. Is it any wonder, then, that Paul concedes the glory of the old covenant, but asserts that the new covenant is far more glorious?

To these people who were being advised put themselves back under the old covenant of the law—and to us, who are always in danger of confusing the law with the gospel—Paul speaks of the surpassing glory of the gospel. And he not only praises the gospel, he uses it. He tells us at the beginning of this letter that it is God who makes us **“stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”** (1:21-22) This is the letter in which Paul says **“one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”** (5:14-15) He says here that **“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.”** (5:17) He declares that **“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them”** (5:19) and that **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** (5:21)

This is the glorious gospel message that stands at the heart of our Christian faith and this is what God has called us to preach and teach. This is the message that determines whether ministers are competent or not. As we preach life and forgiveness through Jesus' resurrection from the dead, we can be confident through Christ before God.
Amen.