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## POWER IN WEAKNESS | THE GENUINE ARTICLE

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We are in the midst of a series focused on the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, which I have suggested is the letter for our times for a few different reasons. First of all, the Church today is experiencing a credibility crisis. The Church and its leaders are no longer considered to be credible by many people, and I've offered a number of overlapping and interrelated contributing factors.

The first is a general loss of trust in institutions. What do people say? They say, well no leader can be trusted. And that's especially true when it comes to Christian leaders for the second reason, which is church scandals, whether you're talking about financial misconduct, moral failures, or sexual abuse. A third factor is partisan politics. People say Christians are too entangled with partisan politics, whether on the left or the right. A fourth factor is celebrity culture. Celebrity culture has seeped into the churches, and people have succumbed to its excesses. People say that Christian leaders only care about their image or their influence. And a fifth factor is cultural irrelevance. People say, "I just don't see how Christianity is relevant to my everyday life or to contemporary concerns."

So the Church is in crisis, and I fear that the Church is losing influence just when we need it the most. Because at the very same time, as a society, we are experiencing what the sociologist James Davison Hunter has called a great unraveling. And this is what he means by that. If you look back over the last several centuries, there have always been people who have rejected the Christian faith. That's nothing new. But even if people rejected Christian beliefs, they still clung to and lived by Christian values, Christian norms, and Christian morals. But as we move deeper into the late modern world, those shared norms, values, and morals are eroding, which means that the fabric of society is almost literally unraveling right before our very eyes. And I think that goes quite a long way to explain what we see playing out on the world stage right now.

That's what makes 2 Corinthians the letter for our times. What we may not have realized before is that the Apostle Paul faced a credibility crisis of his own, specifically related to the church that he founded in Corinth. But the way Paul responds to that crisis is so incredibly instructive for us. This crisis forced Paul to do something that he never liked to do, and that was to talk about himself. But he was forced into it. He was being criticized and attacked, and therefore he was compelled to defend himself. But even then, he wasn't concerned about himself or his own reputation. He knew that if people started to believe some of the lies about him, they might believe that his gospel is a lie, too.

And so he writes 2 Corinthians in particular in order to set the record straight, but he does so in a way that deflects attention away from himself and places the attention squarely on Jesus. As a result, Paul models for us how to choose the way of Jesus,

even in the midst of chaotic and confusing times. And through it all, Paul reveals the central theme: God's power is made perfect in weakness.

Now specifically in the passage that is before us today, Paul provides us with a vision for genuine Christian ministry. And that's a fitting theme for us today, because this is the day when we celebrate the ordination of two of our very own, Twaambo Moyo and Hansol Kang, as ministers of the Word and Sacrament. So if you don't get enough with this sermon, you can come back tonight at 5 p.m. and you can participate in the celebration of their ordination.

But the question before us today is, what does authentic Christian ministry entail? How do you discern the genuine article from the counterfeit? Well, let's find out. As we turn to 2 Corinthians 3, we're going to learn at least three things. Here Paul reveals to us: 1) *the presentation*, 2) *the power*, and 3) *the proof* of authentic Christian ministry.

<sup>1</sup>Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? <sup>2</sup>You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. <sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. <sup>5</sup>Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, <sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, <sup>8</sup>will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? <sup>9</sup>For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. <sup>10</sup>Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. <sup>11</sup>For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

<sup>12</sup>Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, <sup>13</sup>not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. <sup>14</sup>But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. <sup>15</sup>Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. <sup>16</sup>But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. <sup>17</sup>Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup>And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

*2 Corinthians 3:1-18*

## **Background**

The first thing that we all need to know — the first thing that Twaambo and Hansol need to know on the day of their ordination — is that all Christian leaders, pastors and lay leaders alike, are nothing more than servants. Paul says in verse 6 that we're simply ministers, stewards, caretakers of the new covenant. You could think of a caretaker on a large estate. You might be managing a big, beautiful property, but it doesn't belong to you. You can't take any credit for it. It's not yours. Paul's saying, we really are just the help. You can think of us as just the guy who looks after the house and cuts the grass. We're nothing special.

But what you need to realize is that this is precisely what Paul's critics were accusing him of. They looked at Paul and said that he didn't have much to show for his life or his ministry. Paul didn't fit the Corinthians' mold for what they expected: a strong, eloquent, successful spiritual leader to look like. Paul wasn't very flashy. They didn't think that he was much to look at or to listen to. And besides that, it seemed like Paul's life was marked by one difficulty and setback after another, so they took that as a sign that he was a failure — perhaps even a sign of God's disapproval or rejection of him.

But what's so fascinating is that Paul, rather than defending his image or his reputation, agrees with his critics. He says, "You're right. I'm nothing at all. I'm a nobody. I'm nothing special. I'm nothing in myself. In fact, I am not sufficient for these things. I'm not sufficient. I'm not competent. I'm not qualified in and of myself to do anything at all. But God, by his sheer grace, has made me sufficient. He has made me competent. He has made me qualified to be a minister of the new covenant." See, he says in verse 5, "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."

You see, this really is how the Christian life works. There's another place in Colossians 1 where Paul says that we should all give thanks to God because he has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints. And I love that: God has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints. See, we're not qualified because of who we are or what we've done. God qualifies us not on the basis of our record but on the basis of Jesus' record. God does not love you because you're qualified, but rather he qualifies you because he loves you. So we do not qualify ourselves, but God qualifies us for our service to him.

## **The Presentation**

If that's the case, then how do we distinguish authentic Christian ministry from the counterfeit? Let me suggest that the first authenticating mark is the way in which the message is presented. Paul makes it very clear that there's nothing glorious about ourselves as servants. And there's nothing glorious about Christian ministry, let me assure you. Rather, the glory is in the message that we proclaim.

Now in order to make this clear, Paul draws out a contrast between the old covenant and the new covenant. On the one hand, this chapter is so dense. And yet on the other hand, if you pull it apart, you realize that it is so beautiful. This is one of the

most powerful chapters in the entire New Testament. So what is Paul saying? Well, the old covenant was the covenant that God established with Moses. Moses goes up on Mount Sinai, he speaks with the Lord, and he receives the old covenant. And that's why Paul refers to it in verse 7 as the covenant that was carved in letters of stone, because God inscribed the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets.

Now Paul wants to make clear that the old covenant was filled with glory. It came in glory. The only problem is that the glory of the old covenant was temporary rather than permanent. He says in verse 7, "Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?"

So he's contrasting the old covenant with the new. The old was temporary; the new is permanent. And he illustrates the contrast by drawing out the story from Exodus 34. See, in Exodus 34, Moses has spent 40 days and 40 nights in the presence of God speaking with the Lord. And when he comes down off the mountain, though he's not aware of it, his face is shining. He's radiating something of the Shekinah glory of God. And when the people see him, you know what they do? They freak out. That is the technical theological term. They freak out. They're frightened. They're terrified. And so what does Moses decide to do? He will wear a veil over his face whenever he is speaking with the people of Israel so that they aren't terrified by what they see.

But that's not all. What Paul makes clear here is that Moses begins wearing a veil not only because his face was shining but because his face was fading. The glory that was radiating from his face faded over time. He didn't want the people to see that it was fading, that it was temporary. They could not gaze at his face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end.

So Paul makes clear that the problem was not with Moses. The problem was not with the covenant. The problem was with our hard hearts. And so Paul uses that image of a veil to represent our spiritual blindness. If our heart is hard toward Jesus, it's like there's a veil lying over our hearts. It's as if there's a veil lying over our minds. There's a veil lying before our eyes that prevents us from being able to perceive spiritual truth and that therefore prevents us from understanding the true meaning of the Bible.

A couple weeks ago, I suggested that reading the Bible without recognizing that ultimately it's all pointing forward to Jesus — that Jesus is the fulfillment of every promise, that he's the culmination of every story — if we don't recognize that Jesus is the finale to the story, well then do you know what it's like? It's like reading a mystery novel with the final chapter torn out. You read through the novel, and the clues are all there, scattered throughout the story. But without the final chapter, you don't see how they fit together. You can't piece together the mystery. When you realize that Jesus is the finale to this one long unfolding drama, well then everything falls into place.

So what Paul says here is really, truly astounding. Because Moses would wear this veil when he was talking to the people, but when he would turn to go back into the tent of meeting to pray and to speak with God face to face, he would remove the veil. And now Paul applies that to us. He says that when anyone turns to the Lord Jesus in faith,

the veil is removed. And now finally, for the first time, we can understand the true meaning of the Bible.

Years ago I went to visit a friend who lived in San Francisco, and he told me that he could see the Golden Gate Bridge outside his living room window. The north wall of his apartment was entirely made of glass. If you just walked up to the living room, looked out the window, looked north and west, there it was. You would see the Golden Gate Bridge.

So when I arrived at his home, I did just that. I walked up to the window and looked out north and west... and I saw nothing at all. The reason why is because a fog had rolled in, and it was such a dense, thick fog that even though the Golden Gate Bridge was right there, I could not see it. I wouldn't be able to see it until the fog lifted. See, the veil has to be lifted over our hearts and over our minds in order for us to be able to truly see that which is right in front of our very eyes.

Years ago the British pastor John Stott told the story of when he was in school as a young man and he was seeking to share the gospel with a friend. He was encouraging this friend to embrace the message of the gospel and become a Christian for himself, but it was going nowhere. A very lengthy conversation was followed by an awkward silence, and poor young John Stott thought to himself, "I've got nothing more to say." So in the silence, he offered a little prayer that God would lift the veil — that his friend would be able to see. And then as he prayed, a verse came to his mind. He shared it with his friend, thinking, well, maybe this will help him. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, his friend says, "Ah! I see!" And just like that, the veil that was lying over his heart and his mind and his eyes was lifted. And now he could see.

That's what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is someone who has turned to Jesus in faith, and therefore the veil has been lifted. And now you can see, you can perceive spiritual truths. Now you actually care. Rather than being turned off to discussion about sin or salvation or the cross or the resurrection of Jesus, now these things make sense to you, and you become passionate about them. Because now you see spiritual reality. You see Jesus for who he really is. And that, my friends, is what we all need. Because for so many of us, for so many of our friends, a veil still lies over our hearts and minds. And that veil has got to be lifted.

And that's why we have to pray that our friends and even ourselves might be able to see spiritual truth. That's why Paul tells us that the message of the gospel in authentic Christian ministry has to be presented with boldness. That's why he says in verse 12, "Since we have such a hope," — the hope of the new covenant — "we are very bold." Now by that he doesn't mean that we're very obnoxious or that we really get in people's faces in order to try to convince them of the truth of the gospel. No, he says we're very bold, meaning that we're very plain. We're very direct. We're very clear in our presentation of the gospel so that it might be inescapable.

What you need to realize is that in the time in which Paul lived, people prized Ancient Roman rhetoric, which really was all show and no substance. Roman orators, great speakers, liked to try to dazzle and entertain their audiences by showing off with ornate language, sophisticated vocabulary, and the heavy use of similes and



metaphors. And that's what the Corinthians were used to. They preferred a message that was essentially a performance. They wanted Paul to tickle their ears. They wanted something fashionable — something a little bit more oblique than what Paul was offering. They didn't want anything that was too challenging or too demanding.

But Paul says, no, no, no. The gospel's too important, and therefore it must be presented in a way that's direct and plain and clear. And he gives us a little taste of that. In 1 Corinthians 2:2 he says, "When I lived among you, I decided to note nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." In other words, "I'm not going to let you be distracted by my ornate language or my rhetorical tricks." Now, that's not to say that there isn't a place for humor. (In fact, in 2 Corinthians Paul shows us that he can be quite funny.) And it's not to say that in presenting the message of the gospel we shouldn't be sensitive to people's questions or doubts or concerns, nor that we shouldn't use similes or metaphors or analogies or stories or illustrations in order to bring that message to life. Of course we should. But what Paul is saying is that nothing could be more important, because people's lives are at stake. This isn't a game, and therefore he's not trying to be clever or funny or entertaining. He's trying to make the message plain.

## **The Power**

So if the first mark of authentic Christian ministry is how the message is presented, the second is the power with which it comes. It's important to see that when Paul talks about the old covenant, he's not saying anything bad about it. The old covenant was good. It was glorious. Just look at Moses' face. It was filled with glory. It was a good gift of God. Do you know why the old covenant was a good gift of God? Because in the Old Covenant, God literally spells out for us how he wants us to live our lives in response to his grace.

The only problem with the old covenant was the raw material that it had to work with, which was our hard human hearts. See, the goal of the old covenant really was to provide life. Because through the covenant, God says, "Do this and you will live." But because of our hard hearts — because of our stubborn, rebellious hearts toward God — we couldn't do what it says. Therefore, rather than promising life, the old covenant condemns us to death because it just reminds us of how much we fail as the weak, frail human beings that we are.

But that's precisely why God promised through the prophet Jeremiah that one day he would establish a new covenant. This new covenant had two prongs. First of all, negatively, God would deal with the past. He would forgive us for all of our past mistakes and failures. But then secondly, positively, he will do for us what the law itself could never do. He will not merely write the law on stone tablets, but now he promises to write his law on our very own hearts. In other words, through the new covenant, God isn't just going to tell us what to do, but now finally he's going to give us the power to actually do it. And that changes everything.

That's why Paul sets up this contrast between the old and the new — the one which brings death, the other which brings life. The letter kills, but the Spirit of God gives life. The old ended up being a ministry of condemnation because it declares that you

are guilty, but the new becomes a ministry of righteousness because it declares that you are acquitted, not because of who you are or what you've done but because of who Jesus is and what he's done for you. He lived the life you should have lived. He died the death you deserve to die. And therefore your sins can no longer be held against you. You are judged based on Jesus' record rather than your own, and therefore you are declared not guilty. That is why the old covenant shuts you in, but the new covenant sets you free. The new covenant brings release, liberty, freedom. And it's all through the power of the Spirit. That's why Paul says in verse 17, "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

But what Paul wants to make clear here is that the power for Christian ministry doesn't come from ourselves; it comes from the Spirit. And that's what it means to be a Christian. You know, a Christian is not someone who can say, "I've learned some new information. I've received a new idea. I've had a religious experience. I've experienced spiritual uplift." And it certainly doesn't mean, "I've made some behavioral modifications in my life," or "I've made some moral improvements." That's not what makes you a Christian. No, a Christian is someone into whom the Spirit of God has actually come and has transformed that hard heart of stone into a soft heart of flesh — a heart that's now soft, a heart that's now open, a heart that's now receptive to who Jesus is, what he's done for us, and what he wants to do in and through us.

So has that happened to you? Can you say that? That the Spirit of God has come into your life and has softened your heart and opened you up, made you alive to the living God who's made himself known in the person of Jesus? You see, the point is that the power doesn't come from ourselves. It comes from the Spirit of the Lord.

## **The Proof**

So then finally we need to ask ourselves, what's the proof? We've considered the presentation and the power, but what's the proof? What's the proof of an authentic Christian ministry? And you know what? That's what the critics in Corinth were demanding. On the one hand, they said to Paul that you need some letters of recommendation to prove that you're the genuine article. The real deal. Not some kind of fraud or imposter. But on the other hand, Paul finds himself in a little bit of a double-bind, because when he writes letters like 2 Corinthians in order to try to defend himself, they turn around and use that against him, and they charge him of commending himself. And so he says in verse 1, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?"

Now here's the deep, deep irony: These new teachers that had slipped into Corinth who were trying to turn the church away from Paul hadn't been called. They hadn't been commissioned. They hadn't been authorized. They thrust themselves into the office. And so what did they do? Because they didn't actually have any credentials, what did they do? They formed a little group. They formed a little circle, and they started writing letters of recommendation for one another. So they'd say, "Oh yeah, that guy, yeah, you should definitely listen to him. I highly recommend him." And then that guy'd write a letter for the other person saying, "Oh yes, you should definitely listen to him. I highly recommend him." And then they're suggesting, "You know, Paul, if you want anybody to take you seriously, you should have us write a letter of recommendation for you, too."

Now Paul responds — this is the best part — in verse 3, “I don’t need a letter of recommendation.” He tells the Christians in Corinth, “I don’t need a letter of recommendation because you are my letter of recommendation.”

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.

Do you hear that? The proof of authentic Christian ministry is the people that the ministry produces — the changed lives. See, Paul knew that the people who were living in Corinth had undergone such a complete and total transformation of their lives that there was no plausible alternative explanation for it other than a supernatural work of God. He says, “You Christians in Corinth, you are the living proof that the gospel that I preached to you was in fact the truth of God.”

You can imagine the people in Corinth, when they received this letter, thinking to themselves, “Yeah. You know, do you remember so and so? I mean, we’ve known him for years. Do you remember how he used to carry himself? The way he used to conduct himself, the way he used to talk, the way he used to interact with people? But now he’s completely changed. He’s so different. He’s not the same person anymore. How did that happen?” And then another one would say, “Well I remember. All of that began when that guy Paul showed up. That man, he started going to that church. He started listening to that preaching. And he was never the same again.” See, Paul is saying, “You Christians in Corinth, you are my letter of recommendation. I don’t need anything else. Your changed life is the proof that the message I presented came in the power of the Spirit. That’s the only proof you need.”

But think about this. Based on all of that, it would’ve been so easy for Paul to take all the credit for it — to take credit for that change, that transformation in their lives — and say, “Yeah, I did a good job, didn’t I? You’re all my converts. You’re all my disciples.” But no, that’s not what Paul says. Again, he deflects the attention away from himself. He doesn’t say, “You’re a letter written by me.” No, he says in verse 3, “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.”

See, the fact is no human being can produce a Christian. No human being can transform someone into a disciple of Jesus. And therefore, we should never talk about having disciples or followers or acolytes. The only one who can make a follower, a disciple of Jesus is the Spirit of God. And we don’t even become a Christian by making a decision for Christ. It’s not about our decision; it’s about the power of God coming into our lives, transforming us from the inside out. And that’s why Paul says, “It’s got nothing to do with me. You are a letter from Christ — a letter that Christ has written himself on your soft heart. That letter was simply delivered by us.” Do you see what he’s saying about himself and any minister of the gospel? Christ writes the letter; we simply deliver it. “Who am I? I’m nothing but the mailman. All I do is deliver the mail.”

So authentic Christian ministry is marked by the plain, direct, clear presentation of the gospel. It’s marked by the power of the Holy Spirit. And the proof of authenticity lies in



the people the ministry produces. The proof lies in transformation — changed lives. But here's the best part, and we'll close with this. What Paul wants us to understand is that if you call yourself a Christian, if you're united to Jesus by faith, if the Spirit of God is at work in you, then you are a letter from Jesus to be known and read by all. Do you realize that that's part of your calling? Part of your vocation in life is to be a letter from Christ to the world around you.

And if people were to take out that letter — the letter of your life — what would the contents of that letter reveal? See, how does this work? How does this happen? Well, verse 18, my favorite verse in the whole chapter, lets us in on a little secret. And this is astounding. Paul writes in verse 18, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." What is Paul suggesting here? Well, he's applying what happened to Moses now to us. And he's saying, "Do you realize that when Moses stood in the presence of God, when he spoke to God face to face like a friend, something of the Shekinah glory of God came into him? His face began to shine. He began to reflect, like a mirror, something of the goodness, the beauty, the holiness, the glory of God to others."

And now Paul's applying that to us. When we turn to the Lord Jesus in faith, the veil is removed. Now we can see Jesus for who he really is. And when we behold the glory of Jesus, we are slowly, perhaps imperceptively, but really transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. And we know that at the end of that process we will see Jesus for who he really is. And not only that, we will realize that we look just like him. Do you realize what that means for us? That we — all of us — are called to be mirrors that reflect the glory of God. That as we look at one another, something of the radiance, the beauty, the holiness, the glory of God is being reflected out from our lives. And nothing could be more important, especially in the chaotic and confusing times in which we live. This is what the world needs: for us to reflect the reality of who Jesus is to the world around us.

So as we come to this table, behold the glory. Behold the glory of the Lord that is revealed to us here: that Jesus was willing to lay down his life for us in order to establish a new covenant so that the power of God might come into our lives and utterly, completely transform us. And as we behold that glory, something of his love, his goodness, his truth, his beauty becomes part of us. And maybe it'll even show up in our face. Because we're called to be the mirrors that reflect his goodness to all those around us so that they too might discover the truth that can only be found in him. May it be so.

*Let me pray for us.*

*Father, we thank you that even though Paul was challenged, he deflected the attention away from himself and placed all the emphasis on you. And therefore we pray that you would help us to see what we can learn about authentic Christian ministry from him. That the message of the gospel has to be presented with boldness, with clarity, and with simplicity so that people might understand it and receive it. That it must come with the power of the Holy Spirit who lifts the veil so that we can see spiritual truth. And that the proof lies in changed lives. We pray that that transformation would begin with us, and that through us you would reflect your glory out from us to a world in need. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.*