

**02/08/26 How Does God Measure Effective Ministry?
2 Corinthians 3:1-6**

Welcome...

We are continuing our study in Second Corinthians this morning. Acts 18 reminds us that the church in Corinth was founded by Paul on his second missionary journey. Paul ministered in Corinth for over a year and a half. He had received disturbing news that false teachers were trying to infiltrate the church at Corinth. They were peddling a corrupt mixture of divine truth and Jewish legalism to the Corinthians. These false teachers began assaulting the character of Paul. They were attempting to convince the Corinthians to turn from Paul to them. With that pressure and criticism swirling, Paul answers a question we wrestle with too: **What does effective ministry really look like?**

Let's read 2 Corinthians 3:1–6...

Next year marks 40 years in vocational ministry for me. I served as Associate Pastor at five established churches. I learned how people measure “effective ministry” ... Church size, youth group numbers, event attendance, “new” programs, baptisms, college & seminary credentials, ordination status... So many metrics. Often, I felt there was no way to measure up. You know that pressure too... social media likes, performance reviews, resumes... We measure everything. But if someone asked, “How effective is your Christian life?”, what would you point to first? Paul says God has a different standard.

Paul reminds us once again that the true measure of a minister, and of ministry itself, is not by worldly standards, but by God's appointed standard.

Main Point: 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 gives three answers to the question, “How does God measure effective ministry?”

First, by transformed lives, not human credentials vs. 1-3

Second, by God's power, not self-confidence vs. 4-5

And third, By new-covenant life, not old covenant law vs. 6

My prayer is that we all understand that true ministry succeeds not by our resumes, self-reliance, or legalistic rules, but by God's standards alone.

How does God measure effective ministry?

I. By transformed lives, not human credentials.

Verses 1-3...

Look at verse 1... *“Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you?”*

These two questions expose the False Teachers attack and rebuke the Corinthians. Paul addresses the topic of “commendation” throughout his letter. “Commending oneself” might seem as though Paul is self-boasting. The False Teachers were accusing Paul of commending himself in a prideful or selfish manner. But Paul argues strongly against this accusation. In 2 Corinthians 10:18 Paul says, *“For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends.”*

Did Paul need to commend himself again? No. He planted the church at Corinth. He ministered there for 18 months. He had written them letters. They know Paul. He has nothing to prove.

Carrying around “letters of commendation was a common practice during Paul's time. These were letters of recommendation that were used to introduce people to those who did not know them. Paul did use them at various times on behalf of those who served with him. The False Teachers held these letters in high regard. They most likely carried their own deceptive letters of commendation to try to gain acceptance of the Corinthians. They were looking to grow their collection of human credentials.

A couple years ago in Japan, a pastor told me their culture obsesses over “shikahu”...certificates proving status, even for church membership or biblical counseling. One woman said she couldn’t disciple without a “pastor” title. Human credentials rule there. But Paul didn’t need them.

Look at verse 2...“*You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men;*” **Why didn’t Paul need human commendation?** He already had living letters, the Corinthian believers themselves. Paul planted their church, preached the gospel, and saw lives transformed. Their new lives in Christ proved the effectiveness and divine approval of Paul’s ministry. Paul told them plainly, “*You are our letter.*”

Notice first where Paul carries this letter: “*written in our hearts.*” More than four times in this letter alone, Paul expresses his love for the Corinthians. 2 Corinthians 2:4 says, “*For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you.*” 2 Corinthians 6:11 says, “*Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide.*” 2 Corinthians 7:3 says, “*I do not speak to condemn you, for I have said before that you are in our hearts to die together and to live together.*” 2 Corinthians 12:15 says, “*I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?*” He loves them deeply. This proves his ministry. This letter is written on his heart.

Notice second who reads it: “*known and read by all men.*” No one could dispute the change that had taken place in the lives of the Corinthian believers. They saw it with their own eyes. The person they once knew is not the person they now know. They have been transformed from the inside out. If people wanted proof that Paul was an effective minister of the gospel, all they had to do was look around. Proof of Paul’s ministry stood right in front of them.

Notice third who wrote it: Verse 3... *“being manifested that you are a letter of Christ,”*. False Teachers flashed human endorsements. Christ wrote Paul’s living letter.

Verse three then says, *“cared for by us.”* Paul was used by God to deliver the gospel to the people of Corinth. Paul was faithful to the task that God had for him. He prayed for the Corinthians, preached to the Corinthians, loved the Corinthians, and cared for them greatly. But Paul knows that he was not the one who saved any of them. He was not the one who changed any of them. It was God who did a work through the message of the gospel.

Notice fourth what the letter was written with: Verse 3 continues, *“written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God,”*. Ink fades. John MacArthur writes, “Anyone can write a dead letter with ink, but only Christ, through the supernatural power of the Spirit of the living God, can write a living letter.” Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:4–5, *“and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.”* 1 Thessalonians 1:5 says, *“for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.”* 1 Thessalonians 2:13 says, *“For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.”* 1 Peter 1:23–25 says, *“23 for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. 24 For, “ALL FLESH IS LIKE GRASS, AND ALL ITS GLORY LIKE THE FLOWER OF GRASS. THE GRASS WITHERS, AND THE FLOWER FALLS OFF, 25 BUT THE WORD OF THE LORD ENDURES FOREVER.” And this is the word which was preached to you.”* Paul preached, the Spirit transformed.

Notice finally where it's written: The end of verse 3 says, “not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”

What are these “tablets of stone”? For those of you who grew up going to Sunday school, you might remember the story from Exodus. Exodus 31:18 says, “18 *When He had finished speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God.*” The story continues in Exodus 32:15–16, “15 *Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets which were written on both sides; they were written on one side and the other. 16 The tablets were God’s work, and the writing was God’s writing engraved on the tablets.*” This was the Law God gave to Israel in the Old Testament. It was holy, just and good. God set His standard, exposed our sin, and displayed His holiness. But the Law was external. It demands perfect obedience we can’t give. It condemned them.

Now notice the contrast: “tablets of human hearts.” Under the new covenant, God writes His law on the hearts of His people. The Holy Spirit enables obedience, and Christ’s righteousness, imputed by grace, covers our failures.

The contrast reveals Old vs. New Covenant. The word “testament” is another word for “covenant”. The Bible contains the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The Old Covenant was a conditional agreement that God made with the Israelites. The Israelites were required to obey God and keep the Law, and in return, God protected and blessed them. Deuteronomy 30:15–18 (NASB95) says, “15 *“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; 16 in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the LORD your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. 17 “But if your heart turns away*

and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it.” Obey = blessing. Disobey = curse. These are external conditions.

But God promised a New Covenant. Jeremiah 31:31 & 33 says, 31 *“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ...33 “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”* Ezekiel 11:19–20 says, “19 *“And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, 20 that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God.”* God promised to replace the heart of stone with a heart of flesh.

At Corinth, God had written *“not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts.”* One pastor writes, “In both cases God inscribed the same law; His standards of morality do not change. Some wrongly assume that because believers are under the new covenant they no longer have to keep God’s law. But that is not true. Being under the new covenant does not excuse believers from keeping the Law; it frees them and by the Spirit enable s them to keep it.” (MacArthur)

The False Teachers in Corinth were holding tight to the external Law written on “tablets of stone.” They pushed a works-based salvation through legalism, rituals, ceremonies, and outward performance. They denied the connection between the Law written on “tablets of stone” and that written on “tablets of human hearts”. The Ten Commandments summarize all of God’s moral law. And Jesus summarizes the law in Mark 12:30–31 saying, “30 *AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL,*

*AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH. ' 31
"The second is this, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS
YOURSELF.' There is no other commandment greater than these."'"*

The Law written on stone cannot save sinners. It points them to their need for a savior. It can diagnose the “disease” (sin) but cannot cure it. Salvation brings a new heart that loves the Law and wants to keep it.

That’s why Paul didn’t need man-made letters. The Corinthians’ new-covenant hearts were proof enough.

What about us? If you are a believer, your transformed life is the ultimate credential. People around you, coworkers, neighbors, family & friends are “reading” you every day as Christ’s letter. Does your patience at home, integrity at work, and grace under pressure clearly point to Jesus? That’s how God measures ministry effectiveness.

So if transformed lives, not credentials, are God’s measure, we have to ask, “Where does that transforming power come from?” That leads to the second answer...

Second...

II. By God’s power, not self-confidence

Verses 4-5...4 Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. 5 Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God,

Paul’s confidence flowed through Christ to God, never from personal strength or success. “Not that we are adequate in ourselves” shatters self-reliance. God equips every minister. Paul proves it. Romans 15:18 says, “*For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed.*” 1 Corinthians 15:10 says, “*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I*

labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.” Ephesians 3:7 says, “... I was made a minister, according to the gift of God’s grace which was given to me according to the working of His power.”

This truth hit home for me years ago, Tedd Tripp came to my church in Florida and led his seminar, “Shepherding a Child’s Heart.” I drove him to the airport afterward and asked questions to make me a better parent and counselor. I asked him, “What if parents follow your book perfectly, yet their adult child goes their own way?” He said, I would tell those parents to take my book and throw it out the window.” I looked over at him confused. He explained, “Those parents have shepherded their child’s heart. Now they need to wait on “The Good Shepherd “ to do what only He can do.” That was such good counsel. As parents, we can’t raise our children, or minister, in our own strength. We need to rely on God’s power. We need to read, obey and trust His Word. Because Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He is the One we point our children and others toward. And He is the One Who has the power to change their lives and to help them grows hearts where we can’t.

Where do you lean on your skills instead of crying out for God’s adequacy? Church serving, family life, daily work...we all do it. Verse 5 shatters self-reliance for every stage of life. True confidence flows through Christ toward God. So, let’s examine our lives and see where we need to grow and change to depend on God’s power.

The False Teachers were self-confident and arrogant. Last week we looked at 2 Corinthians 2:17—*“For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.”* The False Teachers were “*peddling the Word of God.*” They boasted in self. Paul boasted in God’s adequacy.

If our adequacy is from God alone, then what exactly are we servants of? Paul answers in verse 6...God has made us ministers of a new covenant. How does God measure effective ministry?

Third...

III. By new-covenant life, not old covenant law.

Look at verse 6... *“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.”*

God alone makes us adequate to serve under the New Covenant. Paul compares the Old and New Testaments in one striking phrase, *“the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”*

What does that mean? The “letter” refers to the written Law, good, holy and perfect, but also unrelenting. The Law demanded perfect obedience. Galatians 3:10 says that anyone who fails to keep all of it falls under a curse. The Law exposes sin, reveals guilt and pronounces judgment. It shows man what holiness looks like, and that he falls short. Romans 6:23 reminds us that *“the wages of sin is death.”* The Law is a mirror that exposes our corruption, our sinfulness, but offers no cleansing power. It condemns, but it cannot save.

I’ve seen this play out in counseling ministry since 2004, when I was introduced to Biblical Counseling and the New Covenant’s transforming power. Many counselees who came to me had already tried secular counseling, where therapists zeroed in on symptoms, prescribing coping strategies like breathing exercises or thought reframing to manage behaviors. These external fixes offered temporary relief, much like the “letter of the law” that diagnoses sin’s damage but leaves the heart unchanged and dying. But when their struggles resurfaced, deeper and unresolved, they sought something more. That’s when biblical counseling showed the Spirit’s life-giving difference. We go to the root, the heart idol that they struggle with. As I walk them through the gospel, God promises to replace their heart of stone with one of flesh, writing His law within by the Spirit. Behaviors don’t just get managed, the inner person is regenerated, transforming the outer man too. I’ve seen

marriages heal, addictions stopped, and joy return to once downcast lives. That's New Covenant ministry. We don't suppress the symptoms. We address the heart.

In God's mercy, what the Law could not accomplish, the Spirit does. The Spirit gives life. Through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, dead sinners are made alive in Christ. Jesus told Nicodemus, "*That which is born of the Spirit is spirit*" (John 3:6). The Spirit opens blind eyes, softens hard hearts, and seals every believer for redemption (Ephesians 1:13). He brings us out of condemnation and into communion with the living God.

The Law written on stone condemns. The problem is not the Law's character, but our sin. The Spirit writing on hearts transforms. Under the Old Covenant, man worked and died. Under the New Covenant, Christ finished the work and by His Spirit, we live. That is the glory of the gospel. Where the letter kills, the Spirit gives life.

Closing...

The Gospel makes us living letters. This is why Jesus came. Tablets of stone shouted our guilt. The letter kills because we can't perform our way to God. Jesus kept every command perfectly, then died under its curse for you. On the cross, He took your condemnation so the Spirit could write "Not guilty/transformed" on your heart. That's the new covenant. If you are here this morning and you have not trusted Christ as your Savior, the Law still condemns you, but the Spirit can give you life today as you turn to Jesus in faith. Believers, are you measuring your life by God's standard...transformed hearts, His power, new-covenant life?

Let's Pray...