

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

2 Corinthians 3:4-11

Second Corinthians is a sad letter. Paul had spent a lot of time with the Corinthians. He loved the Corinthians, had brought Christ to them, had gone through thick and thin with them, and desperately wanted to see them persevere in the one true Faith. The problem was that there were false apostles eager to bring about just the opposite, to drive these sheep from Christ's fold and into their own fan club.

Hard as it is to believe, Paul admits to the Corinthians that he is not the greatest preacher, at least not when it came to delivery. Which of us would imagine that being the case with St. Paul, the New Testament's greatest evangelist? We know that on at least one occasion a man sitting in the window fell asleep, fell out, and had to be healed. That's a rough day for any pastor. Just as a warning, I haven't been given the gift of healing, so stay away from the windows when I'm preaching. But Paul is quick to admit his shortcomings, because he knows that the power of the gospel and the faith of the Corinthians do not rest in his person and personal gifts. No, the gospel does its own work, because the gospel comes from God. Paul writes, "*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. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant.*"

Paul's preaching was rooted in the message and not in the messenger. Unfortunately, the false apostles tried to draw the Corinthians attention away from the message and to the messenger. Their recipe for success lacked even a dash of trust in the gospel. Rather, they were sure that they could do just fine on their own. All the church needed to grow, they were convinced, was standing in their very own sandals.

It's nice to love your pastor. It's especially nice when I'm the pastor being loved. It's nice to enjoy your pastor's sermons. It's especially nice when it's my sermons you enjoy. But it's very dangerous for the people to put their faith in their pastor or to judge God's Word in light of his sermons instead of his sermons in light of God's Word. It's especially dangerous when I'm your pastor and it's my sermons in question. And it's just as dangerous when pastors become blockheaded enough to think that God somehow needs them to get the job done, to think that they have everything they need for the future of the church standing in their own shoes. "*Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant.*"

What follows is one of the most crucial points in all of Scripture, both for a proper understanding of the ministry and the proper distinction of God's Word. "*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.” If a preacher doesn’t pray this verse, study this verse, live this verse, he ought not preach at all, because he’s like a doctor with a scalpel but no idea where to cut. Only harm can come from the whole endeavor.

Paul’s talking about law and gospel, the two main teachings of Scripture, here. This is critical, because if we can’t distinguish law and gospel we won’t get either right, our faith will languish, and the church will fall. Satan wins when the law is preached as gospel or the gospel as law. Satan wins when the law is robbed of its bite or the gospel of its salve. So let’s talk about law and gospel.

The law tells me what I must do or must not do. Don’t steal. Give to the poor. Don’t commit adultery. Love your husband or wife. That’s the two sides of the law, and there are always two sides. Every do not implies a do; every do implies a do not. A green light means go, but it also means don’t stop, unless you want to get rear-ended. A red light means stop, but it also means don’t go, unless you want to get sideswiped.

The law was written in our hearts in creation, but that writing has been dulled over time. We’ve been desensitized, and so the law was also written on stone tablets and given to Moses, the Ten Commandments being the simplest summary of the law: love God with all you are and your neighbor as yourself. The first three commandments tell us how to love God, the second seven how to love our neighbor. They are straightforward and simple, yet too hard for us to keep.

When Moses was given the Ten Commandments, Moses’ face glowed, reflecting the glory of God (Exodus 34). The Israelites quickly realized that the law was no laughing matter. And that is how it must always be, because when the law becomes the joke, the gospel becomes a punch line, and punch lines don’t save souls.

Now some of you might want to take issue with me over something I said. I said we can’t keep the law. Maybe you think I’m mistaken. Maybe you think you’ve kept it. Let me prove my point. I’m not a reckless driver—I’ve never hit a *moving* car—but I have, it’s a shame to say, been known to make use of the “Michigan stop,” as my college and seminary classmates called it. That’s why if you ever catch me at Miller and State on a bad day, when I’m doing a bad job of policing my driving, you’ll have to watch out. If I’m behind a car that needlessly stops for what seems like a century to make sure that another car isn’t coming, that the cows aren’t coming home, and apparently that Jesus isn’t about to return, I’ve once or twice considered my mini-vacation behind them stop enough and sort of rolled through so long as no one was coming.

Why would I admit this to you? Because this is how you often interpret the law as well. I figure I technically stopped—I kept the letter of the law—and so I go. But I haven’t

fulfilled the law in so doing. I've sidestepped it. And you sidestep the law whenever you do something without perfect motivation, without doing it perfectly according to the spirit of the law, and out of anything less than perfect love for God and your neighbor. And for sinful human beings, batting three of three in that regard is nigh impossible.

You know what does stop me at a stop sign, though? A police officer. That is what we call the law as a curb. I don't like paying tickets, and the law promises a ticket if I get caught breaking it, and so I stop like you wouldn't believe when I see Thomas Township's finest.

Besides being used as a curb, the law is also used as a mirror. That happens when I look back on my day, consider what a schmuck I was for breaking the law, and realize my need for God's forgiveness. The law as a curb seeks to keep order in society by threatening punishment. The law as a mirror seeks to keep order in our soul, showing us our need for a Savior and His forgiveness.

And, by the grace of God, when we confess our sins and acknowledge our need for forgiveness, we have that forgiveness in Christ. *"If the ministry that condemns men is glorious,"* that is, the law, *"how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness,"* that is, the gospel. While the law tells us what to do, the gospel tells us what God has done for us, from manger to cross to tomb to heaven. What the law would have given if we had kept it, but could not give, because we could not keep it, the gospel now gives on account of Jesus, and thanks be to God for that!

So I can stand up here with Paul today and admit I am not fit for the task God has entrusted to me. I am a dirty, wretched sinner who shouldn't have a license, let alone a pulpit. But the good news is that you're not called to put your faith in me, let alone sit in the passenger seat while I drive. You are called to put your faith in Christ, and the gospel that creates that faith is fit for the task and sufficient. And that gospel is the heart of this congregation and its hope for the future, because that gospel comes from and brings to us Christ, and no preacher can make that gospel more or less sufficient, more or less efficient, or more or less important. That gospel is everything, because while the law kills, the gospel brings to life, while the law damns, the gospel saves, while the law terrifies consciences, the gospel brings them peace.

Through that gospel, and in Christ, we Christians—and we Christians alone—have the privilege of seeing the law in a new light as well, of finding in the law a guide, not to heaven, but instead in answer to the question: how can I now serve Him who has so wonderfully become a suffering Servant for me? It is still the same law, and it still kills and condemns when we transgress it, but it also guides our way after we're forgiven,

showing us how to share with our neighbor and to return to God what has been given to us: selfless and unconditional love.

“If the ministry that condemns men is glorious,” that is, the law, *“how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness,”* that is, the gospel. Thank God for this message, and may you always have messengers that bring it, maybe not in the most eloquent way, maybe not the most entertainingly, but the important things is not how you get it, or who you get it from. The important thing's that you get it. So let me leave you with two thoughts: watch out for a red Focus and give thanks for a gracious God. Amen.