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 2 Corinthians 2:16b-3:6
 Second Message
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THE NEW COVENANT: GOD'S SUFFICIENCY

In the movie, "The Fellowship of the Ring," Frodo and Sam are on a grand mission to destroy the ring. But at one point, just as Frodo is almost overcome by the temptation to put the ring on his finger, Sam saves him. In a state of shock and despair, Frodo tells Sam, "I can't do this." How many of you can relate to Frodo? God has given you a grand mission, but you don't know if you can do it. You feel weak and hopelessly inadequate.

God has called us to himself, called us to be his people. At times we have a vision of being a part of his grand design of redemption and salvation. But then we come up against something that breaks us, something we just can't handle. Perhaps it is a crisis, a major transition, or a loss of faith or certainty. Perhaps we start burning out or become frustrated with the lack of progress or results. Perhaps the difficulties of life pile up and overwhelm us. Or perhaps we just don't think we have what it takes. But whatever the reason, we begin to realize that what we have relied on in the past no longer works. Our own strength and efforts are not enough. We realize that we don't have what it takes to make life and faith work out the way we want them to. We ask, "How can I be adequate?" Nike says, "Just do it!" We look at our resources and ask, "How?"

If this is how you feel, then you are in good company, not only with Frodo, but the apostle Paul, too. Paul had something great to tell the world about the new covenant in Christ, but he faced criticism, opposition and conflict during much of his ministry from those who wanted to hold onto the traditions of Moses. In particular, he faced quite a battle with the Corinthian church.

Paul's apostolic ministry in Corinth was under attack. Some leaders appeared stronger and spoke more eloquently. Others had the sanction of Jewish authorities and were backed by tradition and history. But Paul did not resort to these external symbols of validation. He appeared weak and suffered for the gospel of Jesus Christ. How could he compete against these superstars? What could he say that would prove to the Corinthians that he was on target and these others were misguided?

The apostle had sent Titus to Corinth with a severe letter. When at last he heard from Titus that all was well, he wrote 2 Corinthians. At one point he breaks out into praise, writing in defense of the new covenant and his own minis-

try. He was convinced that God would always lead him in triumph and manifest through him the fragrance of Christ in every place, even in the midst of suffering. But, facing such strong opposition, who could pull that off? Who is adequate for these things? This is the very question he asks in chapter 2:16, where we left off last week: "And who is adequate for these things?"

"Adequate" means sufficient, able, qualified, or large enough. The implication is that we are not adequate even though we spend large amounts of time, money and energy trying to make ourselves adequate. Samuel Johnson said, "Almost every man wastes part of his life in attempts to display qualities which he does not possess, and to gain acceptance which he cannot keep."

Before Paul answers the question of adequacy, he brings up two ways that his opponents relied on to gain success, power and authority. These are false sources of adequacy and validation, but they are temptations to which God's servants often fall prey. Paul refuses to compromise and employ these popular methods to validate his ministry. In both of these areas he renounces what is misguided and asserts his commitment. Only then does he articulate his source of adequacy for his ministry.

The first area of temptation is relying on gimmicks and schemes to sell the word of God.

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. (2 Cor 2:17)

Paul asks, who is adequate to always lead us in triumph and manifest through us the fragrance of Christ in every place if we don't rely on gimmicks, human schemes and tricks? Who can pull this off? The apostle makes both a negative and a positive statement.

In order to have a successful ministry, Paul will not rely on peddling the word of God, like many who were trying to undermine his ministry in Corinth. "Peddle" conveys the idea of misrepresenting a product in order to sell it for dishonest gain. This was a common practice for merchants—selling something that was defective. One conjures up images of used car salesmen or carnival barkers. Paul refused these kinds of devious techniques.

“Peddling” the word of God means using God’s word to gain power, control and status over other people. It means adulterating God’s revealed truth, watering it down or contaminating its purity in order to sell religious products, much like the traveling salesman who tries to sell his magic elixir as the cure-all for every ailment. Paul will have none of this. He is committed to speaking the word of God in integrity, no matter what it might cost him.

Four little phrases modify how he goes about the business of being an apostle. First, he is committed to sincerity. Some think this word was connected to the idea of judging in the light of the sun. Clay pots were held up to the sun to detect cracks that were covered over with wax and then painted. The idea here is to have pure and unmixed motives, with no hidden agenda for personal or dishonest gain. Paul was committed to maintaining the purity of God’s word. He did not use that word to his own advantage.

Second, Paul spoke as from God, i.e., the source of his message was God, not human authorities. Third, he spoke in Christ because he was a man in Christ, a new creation in Christ. And fourth, he spoke in the presence of God, as if God was standing right beside him, observing everything he did and said. How would we live if we were conscious of the fact that God was right by our side 24/7—which of course he is?

Paul refuses to rely on gimmicks or cheating for success in ministry but rather is committed to integrity before God. Today is no different than that long ago day in ancient Corinth. The world of spiritual goods and services is a dangerous place. How many of you have been sold a bill of spiritual goods only to discover that you had been defrauded or taken advantage of? Most of us have had some sort of negative experience with people who represent God falsely.

We live in a consumer society. Churches and leaders sell religious products and compete for the public’s attention, support and loyalty. They are tempted to rely on programs and techniques to be successful. But the unfortunate truth is, they misrepresent God and contaminate his word for their own advantage. They are looking for success instead of godliness. One has to be wary and wise. Not everything that looks polished and attractive will guide you in the truth. I pray that God will keep our church from the temptation to be showy and entertaining, that we will do everything in the full light of God’s presence.

This principle of the new covenant also applies to life in general. Even when we come up against overwhelming odds we never have to compromise our integrity to aid God in leading us in triumph, to bring about God’s work in our life or someone else’s life. We are always above board in all of our business dealings. We don’t fall prey to compro-

mise in relationships. We don’t cheat on our taxes. We don’t manipulate coaches so that our child can get more playing time, or teachers so that he or she can into the right school. We live with integrity.

The second temptation is to rely on human authority to validate our ministry. Paul asks another question:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? (3:1)

In those days it was customary for teachers to carry letters attesting to their validity and legitimacy. Evidently, the ones who were peddling the word in Corinth had such letters. Paul asks if he needs such a letter to validate his ministry to the Corinthians. He also asks if he needs a letter from the Corinthians to take to other cities. In truth, Paul did have a letter, but not the kind they imagined.

You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for 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. (3:2-3)

Paul refuses the validation that human authorities and human efforts give for ministry. Rather, he is committed to the principle that what validates or authenticates his ministry is changed lives. The Corinthian believers are letters that are written on Paul’s heart. They are also letters of Christ, giving testimony to what Christ had done. Everyone can see these transformed lives and read these letters. Paul and his friends have cared for them. They are the fruit of the apostle’s ministry, a letter not written with ink but with the Spirit, not written on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

“Tablets of stone” hearkens back to the prophet Ezekiel, who spoke of a day when God would do something new:

“Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.” (Ezek 36:26-27)

“Tablets of stone” refers to the old covenant, the law given to Moses on Sinai. This corresponds to hearts of stone. The old covenant has no ability to transform hearts. It results in hearts of stone, hard and unteachable hearts. But the new covenant results in fleshy hearts, soft hearts that are teachable and obedient. The law of God, written on the heart by the Spirit, results in transformed lives.

Paul is saying that the new day of Ezekiel’s prophetic word had now arrived. The old covenant is inadequate. It doesn’t change people’s hearts. Using letters of recommen-

dation to validate ministry is an old covenant technique. Paul may appear weak, but God is working through the Spirit to change people's lives, and this is what validates his ministry. This is what happens under the new covenant.

What authenticates valid, new covenant ministry is not a degree, a large church auditorium, large congregations, big monetary donations or successful programs. What validates ministry is people being transformed by the Spirit of the living God. We can keep all the rules, do all the God things, and say all the right words, but our hearts can remain hard and unchanged.

I grew up in a denominational church. I went to church every week and was involved in the youth group. Every Sunday I would go through the motions without knowing why. I wanted a relationship with God very much, but I could not connect the dots. Nothing seemed to be relevant or authentic. Maybe I was just blind to what was going on, but I don't think so. There simply was no life of the Spirit. Many people get derailed and detoured in their spiritual life in a place where transformation isn't happening. Listen to these words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "So many people come to church with a genuine desire to hear what we have to say, yet they are always going back home with the uncomfortable feeling that we are making it too difficult for them to come to Jesus."¹

This is why ministry should be personal and relational. At the end of our lives it won't matter what kind of car we owned or how many widgets we made. What will matter are the people in our lives. There is no problem owning a car, and God wants us to be good widget makers, but he cares more about our relationships and what they produce.

The reason ministry is to be personal and relational, of course, is that God is personal and relational. He wants a relationship that will be relevant, real and vital. He doesn't want us playing or pretending that we are Christians and have it all together. That is the old covenant that only produces hard hearts and petrified Christians. God wants to make us new, to write with the Spirit his truth in our hearts. He wants to give us new hearts that are teachable and moldable.

Paul refused to compromise his integrity or trust in human authorities to validate his ministry. He refused to manipulate, cheat, or rely on human means to produce the life of God.

So we return to our original question, "Who is adequate?" Who is adequate for ministry and for life? Who is adequate to lead us in triumph? Who is adequate to manifest through us the fragrance of Christ when life is difficult? Who is adequate to work transformation in our hearts and the people we are seeking to influence? The answer is that God is adequate:

Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, 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. (3:4-6)

This is the secret of authentic Christianity. Paul is convinced and persuaded that God is adequate. The apostle refuses to rely on his own adequacy or sufficiency, even though there was much in his Jewish background in which he could have trusted. And he refuses to rely on the old covenant because the letter kills. Paul is committed to being a minister of the new covenant because the Spirit gives life. The essence of the old covenant is, everything from us, nothing from God. The essence of the new covenant is, everything from God, nothing from us.

Are you adequate to transform your marriage?

Are you adequate to raise your children to know the Lord?

Are you adequate to be a fragrance of Christ at work when things are a mess?

Are you adequate to find deep healing from your pain?

Of course not, but God is.

Are you adequate to work in children's ministry, or teach in the high school ministry, lead a home fellowship or go on a missions trip?

Are you adequate to lead someone to Christ?

Are any of us who preach on Sunday morning adequate to manufacture the work of the Spirit in your heart?

None of us are adequate for these things, but God is adequate in the new covenant because in the new covenant the Spirit comes into our hearts and gives life.

All our lives we have been trained to be adequate and sufficient. We take courses, read books and go to lectures. We buy the right car and the right clothes and marry the right person. So much of our efforts go into being self-confident and self-sufficient. As I look back now, it's easy to see how I labored to get good grades, to be a good golfer and become popular in college so that I wouldn't feel insecure and inadequate. But it didn't work. We all battle fears, insecurities and feelings of inadequacy. And this is especially true for men, since this is generally men's biggest area of weakness. Men fear failure.

In the book, "Men and Women, Enjoying the Differences," Larry Crabb points this out:

Every man, somewhere deep within his soul, struggles to feel adequate. It is true that some men, including forceful Christian leaders whose strength is more intimidating and distancing than attractive, would report no such struggle.

Typically, they have covered over their worry with such a thick blanket of success (business, ministry, financial, athletic, and social) that the only evidence of internal inadequacy is a strength that seems more displayed than deep. Exhibited strength always has in mind one's own welfare and, as a result, is experienced by others as less than caring. Most men, however, in moments of painful honesty, would admit to some uncertainty about their own effectiveness in achieving something of real value.²

Many of God's servants in the Bible were weak and inadequate. When God called Moses to deliver Israel out of Egypt, Moses replied: "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" And He said, "Certainly I will be with you ..." (Ex 3:11)

Later, Moses lamented that he was slow of speech.

When God called Gideon to deliver Israel, the young man was beating out wheat in a winepress: "He said to Him, 'O LORD, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house.' [In other words, Gideon was a nobody.] But the LORD said to him, 'Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man'" (Judg 6:15-16).

So many of God's servants did not feel qualified for the job: Jeremiah, Isaiah, Peter, Timothy, and many others. But God's name is "I am." God says to us, "Everything you are not, I am."

One of the great paradoxes is that God delights in choosing the weak and foolish. Why is that? It is so that people will see him and not us. It seems God wants us to feel inadequate so that we will fully trust in him and his strength. There is a big difference in being self-confident and self-sufficient versus being God-confident and God-sufficient.

One of the great truths of Scripture is that when God looks at us, He does not see us for what we are, but for what we can become, as He works in our lives. He is in the business of taking weak, insignificant people, and transforming them by His presence in their lives. He begins with us where we are, as we are. He knows our weaknesses, failures, discouragements, doubts, and inadequacies, but He does not say, 'You get rid of those, and then I can use you.' Rather, He comes to us in our weakness with the promise of His presence that will transform our inadequacy into His strength. . . . Hudson Taylor once said: "All of God's great men have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on His being with them; they counted on His faithfulness."³

God has a sense of humor. I have always felt inadequate to speak to groups. When I first was on staff at PBC, the entire pastoral staff traveled to Southeast Asia, to Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Ray Stedman had been invited to speak at several conferences and we all went along to help teach. One Sunday morning we were all given assignments to teach at various churches. I was given the task of teaching at a very large church, while the others, who had a great deal more experience, were given assignments to teach smaller groups. Looking out over the large congregation, I was scared out of my skin. I had never spoken to a crowd that big. I didn't know if I could do it. But then I looked up above the congregation and sensed the undeniable presence of God hovering over the people. I was filled with a sense of peace because I knew God was there and he would help me. I probably was not that good on that Sunday morning, but I learned a very important lesson: it doesn't depend on me.

Nike says, "Just do it." The apostle Paul says, "Let God do it. He is more than able."

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Collier Books, MacMillan Publishing Company, 1937), 17.

² Larry Crabb, *Men and Women, Enjoying the Differences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 205-206.

³ Gary Inrig, *Hearts of Iron, Feet of Clay* (Chicago), Moody Press, 1979), 84, 92.