**Ministry of Righteousness**

 **2 Corinthians 3:4-11**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Christian friends. Today's texts are marvelous indeed. We hear of the mighty acts of God. What are those mighty acts? Is it in making the deaf to hear? Is it in making the blind to see? Is it in making the mute to speak? Our Old Testament says this, "The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel."

Paul says it this way in his writing to the church at Corinth, our text for this morning: *Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

My friends, this is good news for all of us. You see, we have been given a new covenant – it is no longer a ministry of death, but of righteousness.

The first covenant was given through Moses. Do you know what that covenant was? It was a ministry of death, written and engraved on stone! It was a ministry of the letter of the Law. Now, there are some who claim that the Law given through Moses is only binding upon Jews. But the law was not only given through Moses, God tells us through Paul, in his letter to the Romans, that it was also written on the hearts of men. It was written on the hearts of all men, Jews and Gentiles alike. God explains this through Paul’s pen, to the church at Rome.

*For God shows no partiality. For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.* (Rom. 2:11‑16 ESV)

You see, God's Law was not only given through Moses on tablets of stone, but written on the heart of every man and woman at their conception. People know the laws of God whether they know what Moses recorded in the Torah or not. Look around you. Where do sinners act out their deeds? They commit sin behind closed doors, in the dark, because they do not want to be seen doing what they know is wrong.

God has made their consciences to bears witness, they either accuse themselves or excuse themselves. Some people are so guilt ridden about their deeds that they despair of life. Some even go so far as to take their own life.

Others try to excuse themselves, to justify themselves in their sin. These people claim it is their own life to live as they see fit. Or, they try to excuse their behavior as between themselves and their God. Some try to use the world as an example, “Everybody is doing it.”

God's law is holy, and when we sin against God's law, we are making a travesty of what should be holy and sacred to us. To go against God's law, whether we go against our conscience, or if we know it also as it was handed down through Moses, it is still sin.

My friends, the letter of the law kills. The Law of God never brings life. Why is that? Because the covenant of the law requires people must fully keep it according to God's requisite will. To be justified by the law means that we must keep it perfectly. This is why Paul states that we are not sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us. Paul calls the ministry of the law, the first covenant, a ministry of condemnation.

Examine yourselves! This is something you should do before coming to hear God’s Word of forgiveness. It is what you should do before coming to the Lord's Supper. It is something we should do before coming into His house even. How do I know I have not perfectly kept the law of God? Luther suggests that you should *Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?* If we ask ourselves these questions, we quickly realize that we have not been faithful to the ministry of the old covenant.

Paul calls this old covenant a ministry of death. In examining ourselves according to God's holy law, we see how badly we have failed. We have not fulfilled it in all righteousness. And, since we have not kept God’s will according to His demands, the punishment we deserve is death – temporal and eternal death. We deserve to be separated from God for all eternity.

Moses received God's Law on Mount Sinai. When he came down from the mountain, the Israelites could not look upon his face because of the glory of his countenance. Moses had stood in the presence of God and God's marvelous, perfect, glory now radiated from him – his face glowed, reflecting some of the glory of God’s perfect radianc. Even in that passing reflection of God's glory, which was fading away, the Israelites could not stand.

Neither can you and I stand in that glory. Lest you think you can, let me read to you what John recorded in His first Epistle, *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.*(1 John 1:8-10)

My friends, sin abounds everywhere. What your particular pet sin is, whether it is a sin of commission: idle gossip or murder; prejudice or theft; rudeness to others or profanity; or a sin of omission: failing to confess Christ in front of others; turning your back when you see a need in others you could help; or even your failure to tithe; you and I all sin.

It is for this reason that we are in need of another ministry to us, something other than the one which was written on our hearts and handed down through Moses, for there is no salvation or hope in that ministry.

God calls this other ministry, this new covenant, the ministry of righteousness. Standing under the letter of the Law, we are under a ministry of condemnation. We cannot stand by the Law, it only kills. But the new covenant, the Spirit, the ministry of righteousness, gives life.

This is Paul's joy in ministry, that he has been made sufficient as a minister of this new covenant. Listen to the joy in his words. *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? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.*

So, what is this ministry of righteousness? It is the ministry of the New Covenant! It is the ministry of the Gospel of Christ to His people.

Christ Jesus took His place under the same letter of the Law as all Israelites. He was born of the Virgin Mary, offspring of the lineage of David, born under the Law. He took His place under the Law to fulfill it. As God and man, Christ kept that righteous law of God perfectly.

Although He kept the letter of the Law, the Law was still to Him a ministry of death. It was a ministry of death not because of His own disobedience, but because He took your place and mine under that Law. Christ took upon Himself the ministry of condemnation that you and I deserve for our disobedience to that ministry.

Christ, the perfect righteousness of God, became condemnation – our death became His. There is now a new covenant of which I have the privilege to be a minister. I am a minister of the ministry of righteousness.

In baptism, that ministry of righteousness claims you. You are baptized into Christ's perfect death. You are given His righteousness as your forgiveness of sins. Live in that righteousness. You live out your baptism, by daily contrition and repentance. This is how the Old Adam within you is drowned and the New Man, the righteous man, comes forth to live in obedience to the glory of God.

That ministry of righteousness continues today. Christ comes to you in that ministry and speaks to you. He calls you by the name given you in your baptism and speaks to you His absolution, forgiving you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. You are freed from your disobedience to the law written on your heart. You are absolved from your failing to keep the perfect law handed down by Moses. You are redeemed, your freedom from the ministry of condemnation purchased by the perfect blood of the Lamb of God shed for you in righteousness.

Christ sets the table before of His flesh and blood to eat and to drink. He ministers that New Covenant of righteousness to you personally, the new covenant of His blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sin. His perfectly righteous body and blood bestow forgiveness, grant you salvation, seal you for eternal life, and strengthening your faith.

My friends, what a glorious ministry comes to us. Christ's righteousness is yours, and there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. In Christ, you inherit the Promised Land, that Kingdom without end. All that is Christ’s is yours – in the righteousness of Christ. Amen.