

HAVE YOU GOT WHAT IT TAKES?

by Ray C. Stedman

I have often wondered how the Apostle Paul would rate in ecclesiastical circles, whether he would be considered a success or not, if he were carrying on his ministry today. It is hard to believe that a man

- Who spent most of his ministry in jail,
- Who never made enough salary to buy a home of his own,
- Who never built a church building,
- Who never spoke on television, or even had a radio broadcast,
- Who ran around so much that he had no permanent residence of his own,
- Who frequently had to get a job to support himself,
- Who admitted that he was a poor speaker and had a very unimpressive appearance,

could be a successful pastor or minister. He just does not fit the accepted scheme of what makes for success in the ministry today. No wonder they had trouble with him in Corinth, and had difficulty believing that he was a real apostle.

That is what they were thinking when Paul wrote this letter, and that, perhaps, explains why Chapter 3 begins with these words:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; 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. {2 Cor 3:1-3 RSV}

It is amazing, unbelievable, that these people would ever think that the Apostle Paul needed a letter of recommendation when he came back to them. After all, he had led these people to Christ, and yet here they more or less infer to him that the next time he came it would be very good if he brought some letters from John, or Peter, or James, or one of the real apostles. Paul is asking them, "Do you really mean that? Don't you understand? You are our letter of recommendation. Christ has written it on your hearts. He didn't use paper, or deliver it on stones, as he did with Moses on Mount Sinai. He wrote it on your hearts, and the ink he used was the Holy Spirit. As for me, I'm nothing but the postman; I just delivered the letter. God did the work." Paul wants these Corinthians to understand that the changes that had occurred in their lives, the freedom they were experiencing, the deliverance from evil habits such as immorality, adultery, homosexuality, drunkenness, thievery -- "such were some of you" {1 Cor 6:11a RSV}, he said -- all happened because Christ had changed them.

When I read the New Testament I am always impressed at the absolute lack of word in the book of Acts and in the letters of Paul concerning the church and its ministry. Those early Christians did not go around, as we do today, talking about what the church can do for you, or about the value of becoming a member of a church. We talk about that all the time in our day, but they did not even mention it because they understood that the church does not do anything for anybody. It is Christ who changes lives. It is Jesus who heals a hurting heart, or touches a lonely spirit, or restores someone burdened with a terrible sense of guilt for all the wretchedness and evil of his past. It is the Lord who forgives and changes, and this great apostle states that very strongly. He wants them to understand that Christ has written this letter, not him, but they are the witnesses, their changed lives are all the testimony, all the recommendation he needs that what he is doing is authentic Christianity.

If we applied that test to our churches across this country today, I wonder how many would have a recommendation in the eyes of the community around? The ones who would read this letter were the whole

watching world, "known and read of all men," Paul said; "everybody can see that Christ has done something to you." That is the only effective witness the church has in the world today: the change that Christ has made so that the people you work with, rub shoulders with, the tradesmen you do business with, the people you talk to in the normal course of carrying out your daily affairs ought to see that change. That is the point. There ought to be such visible evidence of God at work in you that people will say, "What is this? What's going on? I know your name is Bill, or Jane, or Mary, but somehow I get the feeling I'm talking to Jesus." That is what these early Christians exemplified.

This moves Paul to go on and answer the question he had asked in Chapter 2. Christ, he said there, leads us in triumph. He saw himself as the commanding general, marching in triumph through the streets of Rome, having won great victories everywhere he went. In another beautiful figure of speech, he said that his ministry was like a bottle of perfume, the fragrance of which was spreading all through the world -- the sweetness and fragrance of Jesus Christ himself. So Paul's question was, "Who is sufficient for these things? Where do you get the ability to have that kind of impact upon those around you? Do you get it from a school? Is it a special course that you can take? Is it a seminar you can sign up for?"

Now he comes to the answer, Verse 4:

Such is the confidence [that is, the sufficiency] that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life. {2 Cor 3:4-6 RSV}

This is a very important subject. It is my deep conviction that this is the one truth above everything else in the Bible that God wants his people to learn. If I had to list the most important truth in the Word of God, aside from the deity of Christ, I would say it is this truth -- the new covenant, the new provision for life that God has given his people. But the one thing I find most missing in the church across the world today is the knowledge and understanding of this new way to live.

Paul is talking about confidence; and everybody in the world is trying to get confidence. Every time you turn on television, or listen to the radio, or pick up a magazine, you are constantly bombarded with suggestions on how to become a self-sufficient, confident, capable, well-adjusted person, able to handle life. There are all kinds of approaches, and almost all work on the same basis. Confidence, we are told, has to come from yourself. You have to somehow find in yourself the power to achieve and to be a success. You can build it up through courses you can take and skills you can develop. That is how you will prove to be a successful individual. The world understands, quite properly, that you have to have a degree of confidence. People who lack confidence, who are unsure of themselves, who are insecure, go stumbling through life and never make a good impression on anyone and are always losing and failing. Therefore, the great thing to aim for is to build up a deep sense of confidence.

Paul says he needed confidence too. There is nothing wrong with that. God knows we need to have a sense of ability. But the great question is, where does it come from? When Paul answers that question, he says, "It doesn't come from me. There is nothing coming from us; everything comes from God." Therefore he takes no credit for anything. Read through all of the writings of Paul (and it is true of Peter, James, John, and all the other apostles as well), and they are constantly denying that their ability, their power, ever comes from them. "Not I," Paul says, "but it is Christ who lives in me. I labor, I toil with all the energy which he mightily inspires in me."

Therefore, this new covenant that Paul talks about is entirely different than anything the world knows anything about. The world would say that Paul was a success, and the great apostle that he was, because he was doing his very dedicated best to give himself totally to mobilize all his resources and his considerable abilities to serve God with all his heart. But if you asked Paul, he would never say that. He would say that there was nothing coming from him. And he is not just being modest; he means that. "I don't make that kind of a contribution at all," he says, "everything is coming from God. The ability that is evident in my ministry, the changes that occur in people's lives because of what I am and where I go have nothing to do with my natural skills or

ability. It's all coming from God at work in me." The old covenant is Paul trying to do his best on behalf of God; the new covenant is God doing his best through Paul. What a difference that is! That is the great truth we need to learn.

Now that is a rather amazing claim, for the world for twenty centuries has recognized that the Apostle Paul was an unusually competent person. He had marvelous gifts. He had the keenest mind, perhaps, of all time. Anyone who reads Paul admits that. He had a powerful personality; he had a zeal that was simply remarkable.

He tells us in the letter to the Philippians that there were four things that he counted on for success. And they were remarkable things:

First of all, there was his impeccable ancestry. He was born into the right family and he belonged to the right people. "I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews, born of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the eighth day according to the book," {cf, Phil 3:5}. He could claim an ancestry that went all the way back to Abraham. The tremendous religious inheritance of the Jewish people was all his, he said.

I know a lot of people who are counting on their ancestry for success. You can belong to a family that is well known, and even though there may be a lot of personal weaknesses, even moral failure, evident in your own life, you can run for office and you will make it. Ancestry counts in this world, doesn't it?

I'm reminded of a young man who went out from Boston to Chicago to get a job. He came from an aristocratic family, and when he applied for work, he gave references back in Boston. Companies wrote back, but all they got were letters saying who this young man's father was, who his grandfather was, who his aunt was, what they did, and where they stood in society. Finally, one company wrote to these references and said, "Look, we want you to understand something. We intend to hire this young man to work, not for breeding purposes!"

As well as having an impeccable ancestry, Paul tells us himself that he had a fantastic record of orthodoxy: "I am a Pharisee of the Pharisees," {cf, Phil 3:5}. Now if any people ever gave themselves to careful, thoughtful, religious observance, it was the Pharisees. Scripture tells us that they tithed even the tiny little seeds they grew -- cumin, mint, anise -- and counted them out patiently, taking hours, so that they could give one out of ten to God. When they walked about on the Sabbath day they meticulously took care never to spit on the ground because that made mud, and that was mortar, and that was working on the Sabbath. So they carefully spat on rocks on that day. Paul says, "I was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, taking care that I did not break any rules."

More than that, he had a record of incredible activity. He was the most zealous young Pharisee of his day. At an early age he advanced to a tremendous position of prominence by being granted membership in the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews, even though he was but a young man. He was zealous in his career against the Christian church, "breathing out threatenings and slaughter" {Acts 9:1 KJV}, pursuing this cause night and day to stamp out this whole religious community. He tells us he had an unblamable morality. There was no charge you could level against him, no accusation you could find. His private life was just as clean as his public life. He was, before the Law, blameless. So he counted on that, this keen mind, this brilliant record. He felt that he would be a success because of these things.

But, as the record of Acts tells us, he had to learn through a very painful ten-year period that all that was absolutely worthless in getting God's work done. It would make a very impressive performance record before the religious world of his day -- as there are thousands today who are making very impressive records, religiously, in the eyes of the churches in this country -- but, as Paul had to learn, none of that held a candle, was worth the snap of a finger, in the eyes of God; it did not do God's work at all. If you want to change lives as Paul did, to really upset whole communities and start people in new directions, to give them liberty and freedom in the midst of guilt and oppression, you are going to have to learn what Paul learned, that it is nothing coming from you, but everything coming from God. God alone can do God's work. If there is no sense of dependence on him for that purpose, it is a wasted, useless effort.

Now that is cutting pretty deep, if we judge the current religious scene in terms of what Paul is saying here, isn't it? But he speaks of a new covenant. The old covenant is, "Here's a standard to achieve. Now do your

very best to do it" -- self-effort, build up self-confidence. The new covenant is exactly the opposite. It says, "Just show up, present yourself. God will work through you, and what God demands, God himself will achieve, using you as the instrument of it. You will never get the credit for it; you can never say it was anything you did, or had, or was; it is God alone." That is why all through the Scriptures you find Christians denying that they were the explanation for what was accomplished, but that it was God himself at work. That is what Paul calls the new covenant; and God has made us competent to be ministers of it.

As I have reminded you before, that is true of all Christians, not just apostles. We are all ministers of Christ; there is no special class set aside to be ministers. You too are called to be a minister of the new covenant, depending on God to be at work in you, not on your ability to do something for him. That is the difference.

Jeremiah had described this in his prophecy long centuries before. He said there is going to come a day when God will write his laws in people's hearts, not on tables of stone, {cf, Jer 31:31-34}. It is the same law, but written in the heart instead of on some external demand. He would live with them, they would be his people, he would be their God. They could draw upon his wisdom, his energy, his power and strength for and demand they had in their lives. He would instruct them by his Spirit that their eyes would be opened to see the real meaning of the things they learned. He would settle once and for all the question of their guilt. He would forgive their sins right at the very beginning; and they could rest upon that constant washing and cleansing and forgiveness of God all through their lives. That is the new covenant as Jeremiah described it. That would change their whole motivation and outlook on life.

Paul says something very important here in Verse 6,

... not in a written code but in the Spirit, for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life. {2 Cor 3:6 RSV}

Have you ever found what a law, a demand, does to you? Have you ever realized how it hits you? I was talking with a young man just a week ago who told me about an experience he had. He got up one morning and was thinking about his dad, how much he meant to him, how he loved him, and how aware he was suddenly, that morning, of all the things his dad had done for him. His heart was filled with a sense of gratitude, so he determined that after breakfast he would go out, without his dad having to say anything, and out of the sheer delight of pleasing him, mow the lawn and wash the car. So he came down to breakfast, and just as he was about to leave the table, his dad said to him, "Son, before I get back today I would like to have you mow the lawn and wash the car. I really want you to do this. I don't want to come back this evening and find that you haven't done it." Then he left for work. This young man said, "It changed the whole picture. It just turned off all the incentive and motivation in my heart. I did it, but I had no further delight in it."

The outward law, making its demand upon us, as Paul describes in Romans 7, always awakens a sense of rebellion. We all have it; we all dislike being told what to do. That is what the external law invariably does: it kills motivation. Many of us never seem to learn that lesson. We are constantly trying to order people around, make them do things out of pressure, little realizing that that is absolutely the kiss of death to all sense of desire and motivation within someone. This young man realized that there was already a strong motivation, the most powerful of all, in his heart. He was all ready to do these things, to delight in doing them, to feel a sense of life in doing them, when it was a matter of gratitude for what his father's love and grace had meant to him.

That is almost an exact picture of what Paul is saying to us here. The Law, the demand of God in the Ten Commandments, perfectly right and just demands, things we ought to do, nevertheless always hits us at that point of our rebellion. We don't like to be told that we have to do these things. But the new covenant is different. There God has found a way into our hearts. There he approaches us with the record of his love, of his willingness to die on our behalf, of his freedom to forgive us and to set us free from the guilt of our past -- the immediate past as well as the ancient past. More than that, to make us aware that he loves us, that we are approved of him, that he, in Christ, has already taken us into his family and we stand dear to his heart, cherished by him. Having learned all that about us, then he tells us to serve him in whatever way our hearts delight in doing, and we go about it with an entirely different motivation.

In Verses 7-11, Paul gives us three contrasts. Though his language sounds a bit complicated, it is really very

simple. Let me see if I can pick these up very quickly as we close this section:

Now if the dispensation of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such splendor that the Israelites could not look at Moses' face because of its brightness, fading as this was, will not the dispensation of the Spirit be attended with greater splendor? {2 Cor 3:7-8 RSV}

He says there is a kind of glory about the old covenant, there is an attractiveness about it, symbolized here by the brightness of Moses' face when he came down from the mountaintop with the tables of the Law. God made his face to shine, not Moses; and it was grace, not grease.

But God also made it fade, because he wanted to teach something by that. It was a fading glory, a symbol of something that every one of us has experienced at one time or another. It is the attractiveness to us of a chance to show how much we can do with what we have got. Did you ever feel that? Every jock here feels that way -- in an athletic game it is, "Give me a chance to show what I can do. Let me at it." In business, every businessman feels the same thing. At every level of life, someone can say, "I've been trained for that. I've got the skills, I've got the gifts. Let me show what I can do." We make a great impression. All to whose credit? Ours. We are the ones being glorified.

Paul talks here now about the feeling of attractiveness in that. But the record of history shows that everybody trying to live on that basis ends up a day late and a dollar short. It is just not going to work. After a while it becomes dull and boring and routine, and death sets in. That is what Paul is describing. He calls that the ministry of death, a fading glory, it does not last. But when you discover a new principle, a principle of God-dependence, that in using your native skills, abilities, and training, God nevertheless will be at work. In depending on that, there is an excitement and a glory that is greater than the one you feel when you want to show off what you can do. Thus it will not be you, but God, who will accomplish things.

Then Paul says it this way, Verse 9:

For if there was splendor in the dispensation of condemnation [which condemned us, which brings guilt to us], {2 Cor 3:9a RSV}

Everybody who tries to live a life that is pleasing to God by self-effort always discovers that he never quite makes it because he never knows when he has done enough. A lady said to me just last week, "When I go to bed at night I often wonder if I had tried just a little harder maybe I could have done something that would have made God happy." But she never made it. Every night there was that felling of, "I didn't quite measure up today." That is the ministry of condemnation. It is the result of trying to do it on your own resources, by your own efforts. But Paul says,

... if there was splendor in that dispensation of condemnation [if it had a glory about it], then the dispensation of righteousness must far exceed it in splendor [or glory, or attractiveness]. {2 Cor 3:9 RSV}

Righteousness means being fully accepted, having a sense of being approved by God, of being honored and cherished by him. The nearest word I know to describe this is the word *worth*. God gives you a standing of worth. You don't have to earn it; you start with it. God tells you already in the new covenant, "I have loved you, I have forgiven you, I have cleansed you. You are my dearly beloved child. I intend to use you; you are part of my program; your life is significant. There is nothing more you can add to that. Now, on that basis, with the security of that acceptance, go back to your work." And you go with a sense of approval and security.

Psychologists tell us that the only way you can function in the world today is with that sense of approval. If parents do not give their children a sense of security, they are torn apart by life, ravaged by whatever happens. And it is true of us as well. We need it all the time. On a scale of 1 to 10, that is not even an 8; that is a 10! We need all the time that sense of being approved, accepted, loved, cherished. That is the new covenant.

Isn't that a greater glory than the feeling of trying to earn your way into God, feeling guilty because you did

not quite make it? This is so little understood in our land today that I know of churches where pastors feel they never have achieved a good sermon unless people go away feeling absolutely wretched and guilty. I know people who sit in a congregation and say,

"Man, that's real preachin', pastor! I feel so bad; I feel so guilty. You really got to me today!"

That is a sign of good preaching? No, that is not either. That is not where God starts. He starts with acceptance and security and love, and says, "Now, on that basis, operate!"

Then, one final contrast here, in Verse 10:

Indeed, in this case, what once had splendor has come to have no splendor at all, because of the splendor that surpasses it. For if what faded away came with splendor, what is permanent must have much more splendor [much more glory about it]. {2 Cor 3:10-11 RSV}

Paul is talking about himself, looking back to the days when he counted on his background, his skill, his sharp mind and dedicated heart for success. He is saying, "I have come now to understand that God at work in me can do so much more than I could ever have done. I have come to understand that Christ's work in me is so far more effective beyond anything I could ask or think, that all the glory I once felt coming from the challenge to my self-effort is nothing but a pile of manure (that is the term he uses), compared with the glory of God at work in me. It has lost all its splendor. I don't try to psych myself up in order to accomplish something for God. I know that even in my feeblest weakness God is able to work through me, and that is what I count on. What happens as a result is far more thrilling and adventurous than anything that ever happened before."

That is the Christian life.

That is what the world is waiting to see in our day.

We are all called to be ministers of the new covenant.

God is making us able, not ourselves. If we understand that, life will never be the same again. You can count on that!

Prayer

We thank you, heavenly Father, for this glimpse anew at what is true and real in the affairs of this world. We are made aware, Lord, of how many times we have been confused and blinded by the attitudes of the world around us which continually brainwash us to believe that it is something lying within us that is the secret of true power. Grant to us, Lord, that we may understand this truth, and believe it instead and, counting on you, discover your ability to change and heal and restore and forgive, manifest through us. We ask in your name, Amen.

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