

Competent and Confident

2 Corinthians 2:12-3:6

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Do you ever have a job or a task, something you need to do, but you feel like you don't have what it takes, you're just not able to do it? It could be a school assignment. It might be a project at work. Maybe it's something in a relationship—you need to deal with a person you have trouble getting along with. Maybe it's facing loss and grief. Even with all our experience and training and education and talent, we sometimes struggle with feelings of inadequacy.

Maybe we read something in the Bible or we hear about God's call and God's expectations of us. God wants us to believe, to have faith and be faithful. God calls us to holy living. God sends us to be witnesses and servants of the gospel. It seems like a daunting task and we feel like we don't have it in us to get it done.

I'm afraid sometimes we hide behind those feelings of not having what it takes, not being up to the job. We need to be humble, but not *too* humble. Sometimes we don't want to admit what we're capable of. Or maybe we messed something up so we don't think we can do it right. A man told me, "I did the laundry—*once*." But he didn't do it right, so he didn't have to do it again. I don't know if that was intentional or not.

Sometimes we don't want to acknowledge the resources that are available to us, because we know we're expected to do something with them. If "with great power comes great responsibility," we might just as soon not have the power. But that false humility quickly wears thin. We get tired of living like that. We feel the call, the tug toward something greater.

Writing to the Christians, the Christ-followers in the city of Corinth, the apostle Paul addresses some issues in his relationship with these people. He had introduced many of these people to Christ and had founded the church in Corinth. Now, some of the people in the church, along with some others who had come from various places, are questioning the validity of Paul's call. They don't think he's a real apostle. They think his message is lacking and that he's weak. They're upset over an earlier letter

he wrote them. He intended to go see them, but then his plans changed. So some of them accused him of flip-flopping. So Paul's trying to deal with questions, challenges, accusations.

But Paul has this confidence that wherever he is, God is leading. Paul and other apostles and followers of the Lord are part of Christ's triumphal procession. That image comes from the Roman generals who would return from war and lead a victory parade that included some of their captives. Paul showed genuine humility as he talked about being captured by Jesus.

But he also recognized that God was at work in him and through him wherever he went. He uses the illustration of incense and other fragrant objects that might have been in one of those victory parades. He might also have in mind the incense that was burned in the Jewish temple as part of worshiping God. He says that the aroma or fragrance of knowing God in Christ spreads through his ministry. Some reject it and to them it smells like death because it exposes their spiritual death. Other people respond positively to it and to them it's the smell of life.

As he thinks about having a message and a ministry that bring death and life to people, Paul asks, "Who is equal to such a task?" Who can do this? Who has what it takes?

Paul says he and his associates are not like some who are hucksters who are only interested in profiting from God's word. Instead Paul and company speak sincerely before God as people sent from God. The Corinthian Christians themselves are evidence of God's work through the ministry of Paul and his friends. The Corinthians came to know Christ and received the Holy Spirit because of Paul's ministry. The Spirit of the living God has written God's message on their hearts.

This gives Paul confidence. He has confidence through Christ before God. He says he's confident because God has made him competent. In answer to his question, "Who is sufficient for such a task?" he says, "We are competent." Some translations say, "We're adequate."

Now, *adequate* and *competent* aren't really words you want to hear in a performance review. "He's worked here for some time and he's adequate." "She's competent at her job." We want to be excellent and outstanding. And you hope people who work for you are more than just

adequate. But we do want to be at least adequate and competent. It's better than being *inadequate* or *incompetent*.

Paul's talking about being *sufficient*, having the resources, having what it takes to do the job, to complete the task. And, so we don't think he's saying he can do it all by himself, he says, "We aren't sufficient in ourselves. We don't claim anything for ourselves. But our competence, our adequacy, our sufficiency comes from God. *God* makes us competent." Because of God's power and grace and gifts at work in us, we are able to do what needs to be done. We are ministers of a new covenant that gives life because the Spirit of the living God gives life in this new covenant.

We're not sufficient in ourselves. We don't have what it takes apart from God. We avoid false humility that keeps us from what God intends. And we avoid pride because it also keeps us from the life God has for us. So we seek to have true humility that recognizes our dependence on God. And we seek the confidence that sees the greatness of God and all that God provides.

We can be witnesses and servants of the gospel because God gives power and gifts that enable us. We can live holy lives because the Holy Spirit makes us holy. That is, we live as people who belong to God because God's Spirit is in us, motivating us and empowering us. We can believe and be faithful because Jesus is faithful. He inspires us by his example and he empowers us by his Spirit in us. And, we can live all of life in relationship with God. He helps us in our families and other relationships. He helps us do our best work. He helps us as we learn. As we dedicate all our life and work to God, he gives resources to help us live faithful and fruitful lives for him.

Thinking about the resources that are available, I read the other day what a man said about getting a smartphone. Now, I still have a plain old cell phone. Nancy has crossed over into the realm of smartphones. Our kids have had smartphones for a long time. This man said he has found his smartphone to be a great tool. Of course, tools can be good for building and repairing things or they can be used to tear things apart. A tool is what we make of it and it's only as useful as the owner's understanding of how to use it.

He says when he first got his phone, he had no idea of its capabilities. He just used it to make calls and receive calls. Then he discovered texting and he could communicate in a new way with his family and all kinds of people. Then he discovered there was more power in his smartphone. He could get on the internet anytime, anywhere. If a question comes up, POW! instant answer. If somebody wants to know when the Pyramids were built or how old Genghis Khan was when he died or who built the Statue of Liberty, he can get the answer instantly. He became an instant genius.

But wait, there's more. He says he discovered the power of apps. There are apps for everything. If you can dream it, there's an app for it. And, he says he's still learning what his phone can do. Calculators, calendar, alarm clocks, stop watch, timers, rulers, levels, GPS and more—all in this little piece of glass, plastic and metal. The power within his smartphone is amazing.

He says he's still growing and gaining the ability to be more productive, more knowledgeable, better able to keep up as he learns to use more and more features. He's even discovered the Cloud where information is stored.

Then he asks when all this power was in his smartphone. Was it there all along or did it only appear when he discovered it? "The power to text was always there. I just had to learn to use it, or appropriate that capability for myself. The power of the internet was there; I just had to search it out and discover how it worked for me. The cloud was there, I just didn't understand how to make it work for me." All the things he needs or could want from the phone are already there. He just has to discover them and put them to use (<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/gods-all-sufficiency-in-you-james-may-sermon-on-victory-in-christ-180103?page=4>, accessed 5/3/17).

Not only does that tempt me to get a smartphone, but it illustrates how God's power and grace and gifts and love are available for us to access and experience them in our lives. We access them through praying and studying and going out to serve and witness. As we do what God calls us to do, we discover that God is providing what we need for the task.

And that gives us great confidence. Paul says we have this confidence from God and before God. It comes to us through Christ. It's of the Holy Spirit. Can we trust the Holy Trinity to be all-sufficient? Can we trust the triune God to provide all that we need, to sustain us, to help us?

There's a great old story about a man many years ago who came to a frozen river one evening. He wasn't sure the ice was thick and solid enough to support his weight, but he had to cross. So he cautiously crawled out on the ice and started slowly making his way on the ice. He had been inching his way across for some time when he heard a sound behind him. He looked and there came a horse-drawn wagon loaded down and moving across the frozen river. The ice easily held the weight of the horses and wagon and supplies—and here he was crawling on his belly out of fear it wouldn't hold him!

Do you think we sometimes look like that man crawling across the ice as we pray? As we make commitments to God? As we try to serve God's kingdom? What if we stepped out on the ice boldly with faith and confidence that God will hold us and sustain us?

That's part of the promise of the new covenant that the Spirit of the living God puts in our hearts. Leading into Communion, let's hear again the promise of new covenant from the prophet Jeremiah's message that Paul refers to.

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD.

“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

And the prophet Ezekiel gives this message from the Lord:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (36:26-27)

Then Jesus says at the last supper, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20).

As we receive the signs of Jesus’ body and blood in this new covenant meal, let’s receive all that God offers us. Let’s access all the resources God makes available. Let’s allow God to make us competent, adequate, sufficient followers of Jesus and agents of God’s kingdom.