

**Date:** October 7-8, 2023

**Title:** Look Up - "Look Up for Competence"

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 3:1-6

**Speaker:** Kurt Bjorklund

Let's pray together. Father, as we've heard this week of unrest and war in the Middle East, we're reminded in Psalm 122 to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. So, we pray for that right now. Pray for peace in the Ukraine. And, Father, we pray for peace on the streets of our own country. God, as we are gathered this weekend at Orchard Hill, I pray that you will speak and that my words will reflect your word in content, tone, and emphasis. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

There's a man who is on TNT's NBA broadcast most Thursday nights starting in October all the way through June with the playoffs. His name is Charles Barkley. He's a larger-than-life figure, and he used to play in the NBA. And some 30 years ago when he was at the peak of his career and had the shoe deal and the commercials, he came out with a TV campaign, a commercial campaign. I guess he didn't necessarily come up with it, but it was I'm not a role model.

If you're a little older, you might remember this and might remember some of the hoopla around it because it elicited an immediate backlash. There was a group of people who said what do you mean you're not a role model? Everyone's a role model. In fact, Karl Malone, another great player at the time, said he was a role model. The only question is whether or not we're all role models, whether or not you're a good role model or a bad role model. Charles Barkley's stance was just because I can play basketball well doesn't mean that I should be a role model to your kids or to anybody else.

And I've heard him talk about it since then. And what he said is basically, as he would go into different communities where people would say, all I want to do is play basketball, he kept saying, that's not really a plan for life. Look to your parents, look to your teachers, look to somebody else to be a role model.

Well, fast forward some 30 years, and today, athletes, celebrities, and people of any kind of notoriety don't just think of themselves as role models, but as moral authorities who tell people repeatedly what is right, what they should believe, and how they should live. You don't have to look very far to see this kind of a switch in the narrative, and everybody has a bit of an opinion about how they can use their platform to say this is how you should experience life and how you should live your life.

We started a series several weeks ago now called Look Up, and we're looking at the book of Second Corinthians, which is an examination of Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. There's First Corinthians, which was a bit of a corrective to a compromised church that existed in a confused culture, and Second Corinthians is more of an encouragement.

Last week we talked about the end of chapter two, where he basically said, I'm thankful to God that we, you, if you're a follower of Jesus, can share in this triumphal procession and that you are the aroma of Christ everywhere. But embedded in chapter two, verse 16, is this little question that he asks, he says, who is adequate for such things?

Then what he does to start chapter three is he answers the question. The word adequate that's used in the original language is the same word that's used in chapter three, verses four and five for the word competent. And so, he asks the question, who's competent? Who's adequate to be the aroma of Christ, to have anything to say about how the way of God should be expressed in this world?

Then in chapter three, verse four, he says we're not adequate or competent in ourselves, but we're competent through Christ who's made us competent as ministers of the New Covenant. And here's what's true. That is just like 30 years ago, there was a debate to say, are you a role model or are you the aroma of something? All of us will either accept the fact that our lives are being emulated and we're living a life that has something to commend itself, or we'll accept it or avoid it. We'll do one or the other. We'll say yes this is something that I do. And you may think that based on this passage, this idea of the aroma of Christ, this is just religious people, but it really isn't.

I mentioned the celebrities, sports figures, and entertainers who are constantly saying here's what you should do. There was an article this last week that appeared in *The Washington Post* by Kate Cohen. She basically argued why the nation needs more atheists and fewer people of faith. And her reason was this. She said people of faith do more damage to the good of society. She cited all of her views, what religious people believe, and how it harms society. And she said it's the atheists who do good things for society. So, what we need are more people who are like me, who have my view.

Now, again, it isn't just somebody who writes an article for *The Washington Post*. There's just a mindset that says the life that I live, I think is the right way to live, and I want other people to embrace the way that I live. And if you're a person of faith, the question is, am I living the life that I really want and is it worth emulating? Is it what I want for my kids? Is it what I'd want for my best friends? And so, Paul just simply says who's competent for such things? Who's adequate?

Here's what he says to start chapter three. It says, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone." So, he says evidently there were people writing letters, carrying letters, and using these as their credentials. And he says, no, no, no. That's not our credential. Our credential is the changed lives of the people in Corinth.

If you've been around Orchard Hill, one of the phrases you've heard us say from time to time is that the story of Orchard Hill will be told in the changed lives of people. The reason we say that frequently around here isn't because we think Orchard Hill has this great story, but we want this simple reminder to be that Orchard Hill's story isn't about buildings and campuses and all these different things, but it's about what God does in the lives of individuals. The ultimate story, God's story, is told as people's lives are changed. That's what Paul's saying here. He's saying it's not about credentials and external things. It's about what God's doing in people.

Then he says this verse three, "You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." Here he's alluding to something that's picking up an Old Testament reference. And this is Ezekiel chapter 36, verse 26. Here's what he's alluding to. This is God speaking. He says, "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." And so, God's statement and Paul picks up on here as he says the way that God works isn't through this law and keeping of the law, but through the spirit that enables and empowers people with a new heart to keep the law.

Then he says this, verse four, Second Corinthians three, "Such confidence we have 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 - not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

Again, another Old Testament allusion, this one to Jeremiah, chapter 31, verse 33, and this is what it says. "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.'"

Do you see what Paul is doing here? He's taking these Old Testament pictures and he's contrasting these two ways. In verse four he says it's not written in ink, but by the spirit of the living God. It's not on tablets of stone, but it's on the tablets of human hearts. And then he says this. He says, the letter kills, but the spirit gives life. I mean, who wants to be part of something that's dead if you can be part of something that gives life?

What you have here, I believe, are two different ways of approaching spiritual life but life in general. Again, I don't think that this is just for the person of faith. There's what I'm going to call an old covenant way and a new covenant way. A way that is of the law and a way that is of grace. A way that is of religion and a way that is of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Here's a chart that I want to share with you. This comes from the Life Application Commentary Study Bible series. And there's the Old Covenant of Moses, the New Covenant, and the application of these things. I'll just share a few of these with you. The Old Covenant focused on gifts and sacrifices of those guilty of sin, but the New Covenant is the self-sacrifice by the guiltless Christ, and it means that Christ died for you.

The Old Covenant focuses on the physical building where one goes to worship and the New Covenant focuses on the reign of Christ that's in the heart, meaning that God is directly involved in our lives. The old covenant was a shadow. The new is a reality, meaning it's not temporal, but eternal. The old covenant had limited promises, but the new is limitless, meaning we can trust God's promises to us.

In the Old Covenant, there's a failed agreement by people. In the New Covenant, there's a faithful agreement by Christ, meaning Christ has kept the agreement where people could not. In the Old Covenant, there were external standards and rules, and in the New Covenant,

there are internal standards and a new heart, meaning God sees both actions and motives, and we're accountable to God, not to rules ultimately.

In the Old Covenant, there's limited access to God, and in the New Covenant, there is unlimited access to God. God is personally available. The Old Covenant is based on fear, and the New Covenant is based on love and forgiveness. And it's forgiveness that keeps our failures from destroying the agreement.

Now, what some of us may do when we hear that is we may say, well, does that mean that the law is bad, that the Old Testament is full of laws that are destructive to the way that we live? This was the argument of the woman who basically was writing the article about atheism. She said it's the standards that Christians espouse that destroy. But here's what Romans chapter seven, verse 12 says. It says, "So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good." The law is not something that's negative because it's the law that's needed to show the standard, to show our failures, to show our errors, to show our needs, and to give us a vision of what can be. In Romans three, verse 31, when Paul was debating this in a sense, he said, "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law." Because it's the spirit of God that lives inside the people of God that changes the way that we live.

Now, here's my guess, and that is you hear this and you say, okay, so how does the law kill, and the spirit give life then? If the law is still good, how does this work? I mentioned last weekend that I had on my new discovery playlist some songs that came up, and this last week there was Sufjan Stevens. One of the songs was "Will Anybody Ever Love Me?" And so, I clicked on it. Now you may not know the name, but he's got quite a bit of a claim as an artist.

Here's what he said. "Watch me drift. Watch me struggle. Let me go, because here's what I really want to know." Now he asks the searing question. He says, "Will anybody ever love me for good reasons without grievance, not for sport? Will anybody ever love me in every season and pledge allegiance to my heart?" Do you know what Sufjan is singing about here? It's the cry of the human heart. Now he's obviously singing about it horizontally. He's saying, I want somebody to love me and pledge allegiance to my brokenness and love me in spite of who I am. But you know what? It really is a cry for something that can't be completely delivered horizontally. We get a taste of it horizontally in our relationships, in romance, or maybe in our relationships with our parents or our kids or something. But it's really only available vertically. What I mean by that is it's available to us when we come to the point of saying God loves unconditionally. This is what the New Covenant is about. And our standing isn't based on our ability to keep rules. It's based on Jesus having kept the rules on our behalf. And when we fall into law or we fall into rule-keeping, it's a little easier and we might feel more virtuous. But what we do is we end up then starting to ask again the question, am I loved? Am I accepted? And it's part of this contrasting way of the Old Covenant and the New Covenant because we're always saying, have I done enough? And the answer in the Bible is no. That's what the law tells us. But Jesus has.

I remember years ago I was speaking one weekend, and we were here in town, and we just said, well, let's try a different church in the region. We went to another church, well known, and when we went, everything that was said was true in a vacuum. But I remember walking away and saying that the whole thing was to do more, try harder, be better, fly straight, or

bad things will happen to you. And I didn't use this phrase in my mind, but reflecting on it, what it was, was it was Old Covenant faith rather than New Covenant faith. It was saying, you need to perform for God to like you, for God to love you, for God to bless you. When the New Covenant is what Jesus establishes and in establishing it, He says the work is done.

In fact, when you partake of communion, one of the things that you're doing, Luke 22:20, is you're partaking in Jesus' provision of the New Covenant. This is why he says explicitly this is my blood which is the New Covenant. What Jesus has done is said, I've provided something different for you. Now again, I realize that as I speak about this, some of you may be saying, okay, that's a nice theory, but how does it help me where I live? Because I still feel like sometimes I don't do the right things. I don't feel totally forgiving and free.

So, let me just say two statements. The first is this, and that is, if you have come to Jesus Christ in faith, then you're not guilty because of the New Covenant. That's what this means, that you don't have to come and say God somehow grades on a curve, and there are those that he likes better than others. In fact, you don't even need to believe that God keeps score. And I realize that that goes against so much of the thinking of even the modern church, where so many people think God maybe saved me in the past because I came to faith, but he still keeps score and I'm still trying to get over some kind of an ethereal bar.

And I also recognize that some of us hear this and we say isn't what you're saying dangerous? Because if it's true and if what you're saying, what's going to happen is there will be a whole bunch of people who will say, well, if God doesn't even keep score once you come to him in faith, then why should I do good? I can just do whatever I want and it won't matter what I do.

But here's probably a good analogy. I heard somebody use this recently. Imagine that you're a high schooler and you go to summer camp and you're there for the whole summer. The camp has counselors who do the whole go-around and check the cabins and make sure your cabin is neat. Then every day at mealtime they give an award to the cleanest cabin. And some of the kids get tired of it and they say, you know what, we're just going to make a mess of our cabin today. There's toothpaste left on the bathroom mirror. There are socks all over the place. Towels aren't picked up. There's mud on the floor, and they just say we're done. And so, the counselors who are in charge come in, and their first impulse is to write them up and to let them have it in front of everybody. But one of the counselors says, listen, why don't we just clean this up and give them the award today for the cleanest cabin?

You see, that's the New Covenant. God does for us. And if you're on the receiving end of that, truly on the receiving end of that, and maybe the cabin analogy isn't good because you may say, if I was that high schooler, I'm just letting it fly after that. But if you're really forgiven for something, you don't want to violate the gift that has been given.

Here's how Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote about this a generation ago. He said, "The person who has faith is the person who's no longer looking of themselves and no longer looking to themselves. They no longer look at anything that they once were, they don't look at what they are now, they don't even look at what they hope to be as a result of their own efforts. They look entirely to Jesus and his finished work and they rest on that alone. They stop saying things like, 'Oh yes, I used to commit terrible sins, but I am much better because I have done this and that.' If they go on saying that, they don't have faith. Faith speaks in an entirely

different manner and makes a person say yes I have sinned grievously. I have lived a life of sin. I have failed. Yet I know I am a child of God because I am not resting on any righteousness of my own. My righteousness is in Jesus and God has put that to my account." Now that is New Covenant Life and it's New Covenant Ministry.

But there's a second thing here and this goes back to this heart, and that is you and I don't need to be defeated because of the new heart. This is, again, part of Paul's statement here. He says it's not written in ink but in the spirit of the living God. Not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of our human heart. There's life, not death. And what Paul is doing is he's saying, I want you to know that this Christian life thing is not something that you do through your own effort.

In fact, in Galatians chapter three, where he's writing it another time, he says it this way. Chapter three, verse three of Galatians. He says, "Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?" Here, flesh and spirit or spirit and law, once again. Are you trying through your own effort to complete this? And what some of us might tend to think is that doing right with wrong motives is righteousness. But it isn't. It's a revelation of our unrighteousness. Now, doing right without all the motives might be maturity. It might be saying I'm going to do right even if I don't feel like doing right. But what it reveals is our need for a changed heart. It isn't righteousness in and of itself. And so, what we need is this new heart.

I saw a book by Roy Baumeister recently, and it was on willpower, and it was creatively entitled *Willpower*. I've got these cups. I won't do any huge illustrations with these, but this is just how my mind thinks. He didn't use cups as his analogy. But what he said about willpower after doing lots of research and all kinds of things is he said willpower is a single resource. So, in your life, you have so much resource of willpower, and you can use it on whatever you want. But if you use it on one cup, then you can't use it on another cup because you only have so much.

So, if you borrow willpower from your work cup, it means you have less for your family cup. If you're really into fitness for a while, then you don't have as much willpower to care for extended family or to do something that's a recreation. Or if you're working hard on a project and you're burning the midnight oil, you have less to give to work because you only have so much. And that's his research. And it makes a lot of sense if you think about it. If you think about your life and you try to do everything you want to do and you just say, I have more willpower, what happens is sooner or later you end up on the sofa watching Netflix and eating chocolate ice cream because you just say you know what, I can't keep going. His point is to say, choose where you want to use your willpower.

What a lot of people do spiritually whether they've read his work, seen his research or not, is they assimilate that way of thinking into their spiritual journey. If I battle sin, then I don't have a lot of resources left to serve. If I'm serving, then I don't have a lot of resources left for spiritual development. I don't have resources left for change. But you know what the new heart is about? It's that God changes your heart so that the willpower is in something that you have to constantly summon to keep the rules. You see, that is a different way of living.

Now, you may say well, that's a nice idea, but I've tried that. I've tried to beat a habit. I've tried to push back my temper. I've tried to eliminate a particular sin. I've tried to be kind to a neighbor that isn't worthy of my kindness. So, how do I get there? Well, the answer in this text, again, is you're not confident in yourself, but your competence comes from God. It's as you recite the reality of the New Covenant to yourself and the status that you have that God gives you a new heart and your new heart creates a desire and a willpower to say what I really want is what God is calling me to, and it's the aroma of Christ. And this is the competence that God gives to people. What this means is that in our culture that's increasingly saying we have a way that everybody should live, you don't need to be more vocal what you need ultimately is to be the aroma of Jesus Christ. That is the natural thing that God is doing in and through you.

Now, I mentioned earlier that Jesus, when he instituted communion, said this blood, this cup, is the New Covenant. So, what Jesus does ultimately is he says there was a way, and I believe that even in the Old Covenant they were looking forward to the New Covenant, and so ultimately salvation was similar. But that he's saying there's a way that so many people have related, and I want you to know there's a new way, and it's found in what I am doing on the cross. And so, today, that's available to all of us. Faith in Jesus, repentance of our sins, and warming our hearts at the New Covenant of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

God, I ask today that you would help me, help each of us to see the ways that we let religion and rule-keeping dominate our thinking, rather than the life of the Spirit and the New Covenant. And that you would draw us to the beauty of life in the New Covenant. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.