

YOU ARE AN EPISTLE OF CHRIST

I am sure that you are very much aware of the fact that when the Word of God—referring to Christ—became flesh, lived, died and was raised from the dead, then and only then did the possibility of salvation for sinful men become real. It is only through Him that the world has any opportunity for forgiveness of sins or the hope of eternal life. That is why it is so critical for those who are Christians to realize that they are people in whom the Word of God once again lives in the flesh and that it is only through us that world has the opportunity to both hear and see the WORD that has the power to save?

That is essentially the thrust of what Paul was saying when he wrote the 3rd chapter of 2 Corinthians, which was part of our reading this past week as we continue in our New Testament Studies. Paul says, and I really want you to see this...“*YOU ARE AN EPISTLE OF CHRIST!*” (see 2 Corinthians 3:3)

You have the 27 books of the NT, and then you have the book of you! You have the gospel according to Matthew, and Mark and Luke and John, and you have the gospel according to you! What a wonderful, incredible privilege has been given to us, but also, what an awesome responsibility!

Let’s open our Bibles this morning to the 3rd chapter of 2 Corinthians, and let’s open our hearts and minds to the amazing privilege of being CHRIST’S LIVING LETTERS. Let’s read together, verses 1-6:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? 2) You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. 3) 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. 4) Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. 5) Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, 6) 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.

As Paul begins the 3rd chapter of 2 Corinthians, he is somewhat concerned that the Corinthians might think that he is boasting, or bragging. That might seem to be the case, when you look back in chapter 2, and in verse 15, Paul says, “*For we are the aroma of Christ.*” In verse 17 he said, “*For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God.*” So, in just a couple of verses, Paul says four things about himself, and his fellow apostles that could easily be taken as boasting. He says, 1) *we are the aroma of Christ*; 2) *we are not like so many others, peddlers of God’s Word*, but 3) *we are men of sincerity*; and 4) *we are commissioned by God.*”

So, it is likely out of that context, fearing that he may have sounded too boastful, Paul asks, “*Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?*” Now, perhaps at the beginning, when Paul first came to Corinth and began to proclaim the gospel, he may have needed some way to identify and certify themselves, but surely not again, not now, Paul exclaims. Letters of recommendation are not needed, because, Paul says—verse 2—they are his letter of recommendation. The Corinthian church itself ought to be all the identification and certification that Paul needs.

Why is that Paul? Because, as he is going to show in this chapter, they were a living letter, an epistle of Christ, if you will—**verse 3**—“*written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.*” What Paul is saying is that when he came to Corinth, and began preaching the gospel of Christ, many of people there opened their heart to the truth. They heard, they believed, they repented, and they turned to God. They made that awesome decision to be buried with Christ in baptism, and to have their sins washed away.

We remember that story—of the gospel reaching Corinth from our reading back in Acts 18. Hold your place there in 2 Corinthians 3, and turn to **Acts 18** if you will and let’s look at that just a moment.

*After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. 2) And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, 3) and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. 4) And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. 5) When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. 6) And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." 7) And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. 8) Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. **And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.***

So that is when Paul brought the gospel to Corinth, and that is when many of them began to be an epistle of Christ. We recall from an even earlier study in Acts that when a person obeys the gospel, they are also given the Holy Spirit, and just as the Holy Spirit was given to the apostles in a miraculous way to guide them into all the truth, His coming to dwell in us also has the effect of bringing that truth to life. And so Paul is in effect saying, we do not need another letter of commendation—at least not for the Corinthians—because the Corinthians themselves, as living letters, is proof that Paul’s work among them truly bears the witness of God.

And Paul goes on to say—I'm back in **2 Corinthians 3, verse 4**—that because of what Christ had done in Corinth through Paul and those working with him, that he had every reason to be confident in them. He then quickly goes on to disclaim credit for any of that by saying—**verses 5 & 6**:

“Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, 6) 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.”

No, Paul says, that wasn't us. All the glory and praise belong to God. Paul says, God was the one who made them competent as ministers of a new covenant. And this is something that we also need to keep in mind as we seek God and seek to be His servants today. Our competency and sufficiency is not in ourselves, but in God. Yea, even our right to become a part of God's kingdom and work is due to God, and not to ourselves. I like what Paul wrote to the **Colossians, in 1:9-14**:

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10) so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. 11) May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, 12) giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. 13) He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14) in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Now, going back to 2 Corinthians 3, in speaking about the new covenant, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, and not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts, Paul is obviously contrasting the old covenant, inaugurated in the days of Moses, with the New Covenant, given to us by Christ. In other words, Paul is saying, we did not come to make you a participant of that old covenant, but of something new.

Many people have failed to understand this point and they have failed to appreciate the significance of what Christ did in giving the world a new covenant, one that all men could be a part of, and not just the Jews.

The **Hebrew writer** makes reference to this same thing in the **8th chapter** of that letter. Quoting from the OT prophet Jeremiah, beginning in **verse 6**, the writer says,

“But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. 7) For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. 8) For he finds fault with them when he says: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house

of Israel and with the house of Judah, 9) not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. 10) For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 11) And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. 12) For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." 13) In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

No, we need to be clear, Christians are not ministers or letters of the old covenant. We are living letters of something that is new and wonderful.

Now let me make something clear. Look at the last sentence in verse 6. Paul says, "*For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*" This verse has been wrested out of context so many times by so many false teachers. Every time someone wants to teach something that is not in harmony with apostolic teaching—which of course was given to them through the Holy Spirit—they will quote this part of verse 6. They will say, "*we do not need to pay attention to the words of scripture—whether New or Old—because we have the Spirit of Christ.*" And then what they will do is pit the words of scripture against the Holy Spirit! Folks, you cannot do that! You cannot take the words that the Holy Spirit gave us and use them against themselves. In **John 6:63**, Jesus said, "*It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.*"

In your efforts and attempts to be Christ's living letter, you are never going to have an occasion when the Spirit in you is going to have you doing anything that is contrary to His Word, or without its support.

In verses 7-15, Paul has an interesting, if not difficult discussion concerning Moses and the his wearing of a veil after coming down from Mt. Sinai, and how that symbolized a veil that the Jews still had over their eyes, preventing them from seeing and accepting the new covenant. I wish we had more time to discuss all of that, and maybe you were able to do some of that in class this week, but dropping down to **verse 16**, Paul gives us an insight into how we can be that living letter of Christ that we need to be. Paul says,

But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. 17) Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18) And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

As Christians, as those who have become participants in the new covenant, we understand the greater glory that belongs to the Lord and His gospel. We understand that a new and living way has been opened up for men to be saved, and it is not based on the Law of Moses, including the Ten Commandments, but on the love and grace and mercy of God, that was secured for us by the sacrifice of Christ.

And when we understand that, and we embrace the gospel, we open ourselves up for having the Spirit to come and dwell in us and begin writing the Word on our heart, so that it begins to be manifested in our life. And Paul says, the Spirit accomplishes that very thing, as we gaze upon “the glory of the Lord.” As we do that, Paul says, we “are being transformed.” Do you hear that? Paul says we are being transformed (or changed) into the same image. What image is Paul talking about? He is talking about the image of the Lord. That is we are being changed, becoming more and more like the Lord, “from one degree of glory to another.” That is, bit by bit, becoming brighter and brighter, we are beginning to look and sound more and more like Christ.

That’s our goal. To become more and more like Christ, from one degree of glory to another. I would suggest to you that tells us that it is not going to be an overnight process, but something that takes time. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 that if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; old things have passed away, all things have become new. From God’s perspective that is true, but from our perspective, we can see that we have a long ways to go. Being a new creature begins with one’s decision to put on Christ, but understand it is a process that takes time. Bit by bit, we are becoming brighter and brighter, and beginning to look more and more like Christ. We begin to speak like Christ, be more like Him and when people see us, they are seeing one who is growing in the likeness of his or her Creator.

I want to encourage you to take this challenge seriously. Stay in the word so that you can continue to gaze upon the glory of God and allow that process to take place in your life so that you begin to look and sound more and more like Christ.

Invitation

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