

Living Letters

2Corinthians 3:1-6

Readers of the bible will notice that within its pages there is more than one kind of writing.

Some of the books in the bible are narrative.

That is they record accounts and events in the history of God's people.

They tell us about the stories of people, where they lived, what they did, and how God worked in and through them.

These are books like Genesis, Exodus, Joshua Judges, Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Besides narrative books there is wisdom literature in the bible.

These are writings primarily concerned with the application of God's word to everyday life often written in poetic form.

Proverbs and Psalms are primary examples of this.

There is also apocalyptic literature in the Bible.

We find a good amount of this in the prophets and it often concerns the things of God's judgement and the end of the world.

These writings contain imagery, visions, and symbols.

Also, in the bible we find the epistles.

The word epistle simply means a letter.

These books are someone (most often an Apostle of Jesus) writing a letter to a person or a group of people about a particular situation or subject.

The amazing part of this is that even though the different parts of the bible were written in different times, to different places, in different ways, and to different people they all come together to form a complete book which is able to communicate all that God wants for His people throughout every age.

It's amazing. I have often said and it is worth repeating that there is no other book like the Bible.

The reason why it can be written over thousands of years, to different people, even in different languages, and all form one book is because while there are over 40 different human authors they are all inspired by one God.

That is why we rightly call this book the word of God. Because God the Holy Spirit so moved in the hearts and minds of the writers that they wrote exactly what the LORD intended.

This is a book that has endured and will endure throughout all time because it is God's word.

What the Holy Spirit has done in writing and preserving the Word of God in the world is something we should all marvel at, but it is not the only thing He has done and is doing in the World.

He has done more than inspired the writing of words on ink and paper.

He has also written and is still writing 'living letters'.

[That is the subject of our text this morning **2Corinthians 3:1-6**. In these verses Paul continues to talk of his gospel ministry among the Corinthians and the main focus of this text is the work of the Spirit in the lives of believers through the ministry of the gospel. There are three powerful lessons for us in these verses. Number one is this...]

Point #1 – Gospel ministry does not depend on the approval of people. (Verses 1-2)

Wise people are willing to listen to others, especially those who have shown themselves to be godly in their character; however, wise people also know better than to overemphasize the opinions and credentials of mere human beings.

Verse one begins by asking two questions, look with me at what the apostle asks the church at Corinth. (Verse 1)

As he often does in his letters, Paul is asking rhetorical questions here with the expected answer being NO!

He just finished saying at the end of chapter two that he and his fellow workers are sincere men and have been commissioned by God for the preaching of Christ.

That sounds like he is trying to make himself and his companions look good to the church.

That is NOT the case at all. Instead, he is simply stating the facts of the situation.

He knows the situation of his audience, however, and anticipates the possibility of a misunderstanding.

Is he saying these things to make himself and the others with him look good? No!

What about references, what he calls here 'letters of recommendation'?

Notice he asks, "Do we need [them], as some do?"

Meaning there have been people who came into the church with letters of recommendation and used those letters as a means of gaining entry and favour among the believers there.

It is clear from the way Paul asks the question he has a low view of these people trying to work their way into the church and he has that view because they are bringing harmful teaching to the gathering of believers and the 'letters of recommendation' are being used towards that end.

Even worse, they are trying to get references from the Corinthians so that they can spread their teaching to other churches as well.

We can only guess as to who the first letters came from, but wherever they came from they seem to have had some kind of effect in the church and that effect has negatively impacted the true gospel ministry of Paul and his fellow workers.

So Paul here needs to, for the good of the people in the church, draw a comparison between his ministry and that of these people with the 'letters'.

He says, "Do we need those letters?" Answer, no we do not.

Why? He gives us the answer in **verse 2**.

He says that the people who became a part of the church, which happened as a result of his gospel ministry in the city, are 'written on our hearts'.

What else could he mean by that other than he has a deep and abiding affection for them?

When he says at the end of the verse that they are a 'letter of recommendation...to be known and read by all' he is saying that the effect of this gospel ministry has become evident to everyone who can see it.

For all the problems this church was having, there is still evidence that something had changed on account of their believing the gospel as preached by Paul and his fellow workers.

Do you see? His emphasis is on the value of his ministry rather than the approval of people.

[A few years ago I dealt with a situation where someone expressed a concern about a teacher at a youth event. The teacher was all offended and had the attitude of, "How dare you question me? I have a Master's Degree and everyone else thinks I'm amazing. Who are you to ask me questions?" I didn't take long to learn that the concerns were legitimate and the teacher was trying to side step the issue by touting the approval of other people.]

Of course the approval of people can be a helpful thing. Paul, himself, in multiple places in the New Testament commends people.

I believe very much that ministry approved by God is recognized amongst God's people, but when we flip that on its head and try to say God approves because people do then we have a problem.

Having a Master's Degree is good, but it doesn't automatically make you a godly person or a good minister of the gospel.

People appreciating you can be good, but it can also be incredibly dangerous because it can make you very vulnerable to self-deception and worse unrealized pride.

What mere human beings think is no basis for approval.

[If someone says, “You should listen to me because of such and such a degree, or because all of these people like me!” A red flag should go up in your mind because statements like that are putting too much emphasis on the approval of people. That raises an important question. If gospel ministry does not depend on the approval of people, what does it depend on? Paul already hinted at it when he talked about these believers being ‘written on his heart’ and he makes it crystal clear in the next two verses that...]

Point #2 – Gospel ministry depends on the work of the Holy Spirit. (Verses 3-4)

Only God has the power to penetrate flesh and bone to surgery upon the spiritual condition of people and so any work we may do for sake of making the name of Jesus loved in this world must be done with great humility.

The metaphor of these believers being living letters is carried on in verse 3, let’s look together are the first part of that verse. (Verse 3a)

Paul sees his work in the gospel as being a letter carrier or today we might say mailman. He is the letter carrier, the people converted under his ministry are the letters and the letters are ‘from Christ’.

That connects back to verse two where he says these believers as living letters are ‘known and read by all.’

So, if I am seeing this correctly, ministers of the gospel are mailmen, the converts to the gospel are letters from Christ (also meaning they belong to Him), and the readers of the letters are everyone that sees them.

He continues with the metaphor (Verse 3-4).

‘Written not with ink’ (a likely comparison to the letters of recommendation mentioned earlier) and not written on ‘tablets of stone’ almost certainly a reference to the stone tablets upon which God Himself inscribed the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai (something he will develop further in the coming verses), but instead ‘written with the Spirit of the living God’.

So the full picture is this. Jesus is the author, believers are the letter to the whole world, and the Holy Spirit is the scribe Who is writing the work of Christ upon the hearts of human beings.

That should both astound us and cultivate humility in us at the same time.

It is astounding because it is only possible according to the power of God. It is a fulfillment of the promise of God in Ezekiel 11:9 “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.”

He is talking there about a spiritual condition rather than a physical one.

[I am absolutely amazed at what doctors and surgeons can do these days. They can operate on the heart muscle, doing bypass surgery, putting in new valves, places stints to improve blood flow, and they can even take the heart from one person and put it in another. Let's ask, if they go that far and completely change a person's physical heart can they change who the person is? Nope, the best they can do is delay death for a short time.]

In the ministry of the Gospel something happens that is impossible for any human being to do.

The Holy Spirit writes the will of Christ upon the affections of a human being.

He writes upon the very soul of a person for the sake of displaying the glory of Jesus in the world.

That should amaze us and it should push us towards great humility as well.

By humility I do not mean thinking negatively about ourselves, that is not humility but another form of pride.

By humility I mean taking our attention off ourselves entirely and putting it on the work of God.

That is one of the most fantastic things we can possibly do because when we do that our hope, joy, and confidence is in the power of the Holy Spirit rather than in ourselves.

Listen, we will never be more satisfied, more joyful, more courageous, and more at peace than when we delight ourselves in what God does according to His power and grace.

[Every now and again I am reminded of what a problem plagiarism is. It is surprisingly common for people to take someone else's idea or writing and pass it off as their own. Students do that, politicians do that, and sadly I know of multiple instances of pastors doing that. You know more often than not people who try to plagiarize get caught, especially those who persist in it. When that happens the results are usually pretty bad and rightly so.]

It is really easy to be guilty of that as Christians when it comes to the work of God.

It is so easy to take credit for the work of the Spirit.

It is so easy to portray ourselves as the author or scribe when we are in fact letter carriers.

When we get that mixed up it tends to end badly.

We tend to start craving affirmation from people.

We tend to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to.

We tend to see people as owing us some kind of debt.

We tend to see ourselves as needing recognition and reward from people.

None of that is good for us and eventually leads to some kind of downfall in our lives.

[We cannot deny reality without paying some kind of cost and that is certainly true when it comes to the ministry of the gospel in the world. We must keep at the forefront of our minds the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit. Only he can write on the tablet of the human heart. That is Paul's confidence in the Corinthians which leads him to another lesson in verses 5-6 and it is an incredibly encouraging one. Gospel ministry does not depend on the approval of people, but instead it depends on the power of the Holy Spirit, and...]

Point #3 – Gospel ministry empowered by Spirit produces life. (Verses 5-6)

When people are changed by God they have a new and growing desire to enjoy Who God is and what He commands, serving Him not out of obligation but out of love.

Paul stays with the theme of humility in verse 5.

In chapter 2:16 Paul had asked a question in regards to the ministry of the gospel.

He asked, "Who is sufficient for these things?" The answer is no one and he makes it clear here in chapter 3:5 that what he has written also applies to himself.

What is striking to me is that Paul had all kinds of reasons the think he was sufficient in himself.

He was born into a good family, had a fantastic education, was trained in the Scriptures by a famous teacher, met the LORD personally, and the list goes on.

He had all kinds of good reasons to think that he was sufficient, but instead he says he and his companions are not sufficient in themselves, but their sufficiency comes from God.

It is important to keep in mind here that this is most often something that is unseen.

Sermons preached, music played, letters written, wise questions asked, moments of hospitality, and alike all appear to be things we do according to our own ability; therefore, it is easy to see the results of those things as being a result of the same.

Paul doesn't see any of it as the result of his own ability, but rather the work of the unseen Holy Spirit in the world for the glory of Jesus' Name.

So he says, "Our sufficiency is from God" and then he writes this in **verse 6**.

Paul knows well the power of the 'letter' to kill.

As we will see next week his reference to 'tablets of stone' in verse 3 and the reference to the 'letter' here is to the Mosaic Law which we find in the Old Testament.

He is saying here that the letter of the law 'kills'.

How many of you think that sounds like a bad thing?

We must be careful to think about this rightly. The apostle is not saying here that the Old Testament is bad, again we will see that more clearly next week.

He is also not saying that everyone before the coming of Jesus is lost under the judgement of God.

Also, very importantly, he is not saying that the Holy Spirit was absent from the Old Testament.

The Holy Spirit inspired the Old Testament every bit as much as the New.

Salvation by grace through faith is all throughout the written word of God because according to Jesus the whole bible is about Him.

Paul's point here is that the Law of God by itself cannot save anyone.

Why? First of all because we don't keep it.

All of us are much farther from perfection that we would like to admit or even realize.

But our problem is even worse than that and this is why 'the letter kills'. It is much worse than breaking the law, it is that our nature wants to rebel against God's law.

[Think about it. Imagine a big red button that says, "Do Not Touch" what do you want to do? I'll tell what I want to do. I want to push the button.]

That is why the letter kills. Not because God's laws and commands are bad, but because we want to break them and because God is perfectly just he must punish everyone who breaks His laws.

Breaking God's laws is more than simple law breaking it is showing contempt for God Himself.

That is why the letter kills, BUT it says here right at the end of verse 6 that "the Spirit gives life".

The letter can only tell us what to do or not to do.

The Spirit can transform our hearts to give us a desire to want to do what God says and avoid what He forbids.

The Spirit can give us a heart that obeys out of love and enjoyment of the LORD and his ways.

That brothers and sisters is life!

[Most of us will get this if we think about work. How many people have heard it said, “If you love what you do you will never work a day in your life”? That is so true. If you ask me to build something out of wood I am generally happy to do it. If you ask me to paint something I’m generally not a fan. But what if I woke up tomorrow and I loved to paint? Then I would want to do it.]

That is the power of the Holy Spirit giving life to the people of God.

He changes our hearts and gives us a love for the things of God.

The Christian’s attitude towards these things is NOT “we do them because we have to.”

We are completely made right with God by Jesus dying on the cross. We never add a single thing to that. Any good that we do makes no difference whatsoever in terms of our right standing with God.

If we do what is right because we have to, that is certainly less bad than outright rebellion against God, but it is still sin because such an attitude is denying the goodness of God.

It is only when we do what is right because we want to that we are fully obeying God and that is only possible because the Holy Spirit makes us alive.

Let’s ask ourselves, do we have a pulse this morning?

Do we have a desire to obey God out of love for Him?

If we do then Praise God, the Spirit has given us and is giving us life in Christ.

Are you feeling the weight of unconfessed or unrepentant sin in your life this morning?

Don’t ignore it. Don’t make excuses for it. This is the Spirit of the living God calling you to life today.

Listen to Him, He is writing things on the tablet of your heart to display the goodness of Jesus to the world.

If you are in Christ this morning then you are a living letter from Jesus to the world written by the Holy Spirit.

Do not resist His pen, but instead enjoy it and truly live.