

Letters from Christ (Discussion Guide on pg.12)

2 Corinthians 3:1-7

In a recent devotional, Pastor Jim Cymbala shared a story about an marital counseling session he had with a couple he met with for the first time. The counseling session was not going well. The husband was obnoxious and out of control. So, Cymbal turned to the wife and said, do you trust that I'm not here to take sides but to counsel you from the word of God. She replied, "I trust and respect you Pastor." He turned to the husband and asked the same question. The husband responded, "I respect you pastor. I've been coming to this church for nine years. Your ministry means the world to me. I'm the man that I am because of you." Pastor Cymbala shared in the devotional that at that moment he thought in his mind, "what have I've done. I'm a failure as a pastor."

Of course, the Pastor was half joking when he said that. However, a Pastor, who is commissioned by God, will have a deep concern for the spiritual health of his congregation. And he measures that spiritual health not by how many people are coming to the church but by who the people are becoming.

While exhorting church leaders, Cymbala shared, "Our fear as pastors should not be that people might leave our church but rather that they stay in our church and remain unchanged."

To clarify what Pastor Cymbala meant, Daniel Henderson explained, "Jim was not referring to struggling souls who fall between the cracks of our church activities. Every church should pursue an environment where the lost, the hurting, the struggling are cared for by the saints, expressing genuine compassion and biblical counsel. Rather, he was referring to those who are intolerant of strong, needful, and often convicting preaching. They leave in search of an easier, more comfortable, and entertaining message...In our culture of "immediate gratification", it is easy to become intoxicated with the instant excitement of attractive services, appealing programs, and artistic communication to hold the attention and entice the participation of more people. Even Jesus saw crowds gather often to receive the

blessings of His miraculous power. Yet, very regularly He boldly defined the essence of a genuine follower. Many stopped following in response to His hard message (John 6:66-67; Luke 14:15-35). This did not trouble Christ. He knew that His Gospel would not be advanced by the fickle affections of the crowds but by the extraordinary and enduring sacrifice of a band of transformed disciples who could not help but 'speak of what they had seen and heard.' This focus produced the ultimate advancement of the Gospel in the world."

As we will see in our text, the apostle Paul was not like the others he facetiously called "super apostles" who were peddlers of God's word. He wasn't going to water down the message of the gospel simply to gain a following or financial prosperity. His heart's desire was to see people transformed by Christ.

And Paul not only assumed responsibility for the spiritual growth of others, he was confident enough in Christ to point to their spiritual transformation as living proof of the authority of his gospel ministry.

Main idea: Growing believers are God's open letter to the world by which He authenticates the saving power of the gospel.

This morning we are going to see how believers, who are living letters from Christ, are made and delivered to this world.

1. Living letters are crafted (inscribed) by the saints of Christ

First of all, living letters are crafted by the saints of Christ—by Spirit filled believers. As we unpack this first point, keep in mind that Paul was dealing with some opposition within the church of Corinth. With facetious irony, Paul referred to those opposing him as super apostles (2 Corinthians 11:5-6). He did so because they viewed themselves and their ministry as superior to Paul.

But the irony was that the opposite was true. The super-apostles had the stuff that the sophisticated society of Corinth would have viewed as marks of success. They had material prosperity, eloquence, and physical strength.

Paul, on the other hand, had the marks of the Lord Jesus (Gal. 6:17). He had physical scars which he received while on mission for Christ. Moreover, Paul also had the aroma of Christ's self-emptying and self-giving love (2 Cor. 5:14-15).

To those whose spiritual senses were awakened by the Holy Spirit, this divine fragrance upon Paul was an aroma of life. But to those super apostles, filled with self-ambition, it was an aroma of death—an aroma not to be desired, spread or appropriated. These super-apostles not only criticized Paul's every move, they questioned his fitness as an apostle of Christ.

Now, with this in mind, Paul writes beginning in verse 1: "*Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?*" (2 Corinthians 3:1)

Although Paul did defend his integrity in this letter, that was not his ultimate aim. Rather, his ultimate aim and goal was to spiritually build up and restore the Corinthian believers. But Paul knew that his faultfinding detractors would once again use his words against him and accuse him of pride and self-adulation.

So, anticipating how his detractors would twist his words, Paul asked these probing questions: "*Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?*" (2 Corinthians 3:1). Now Paul is not saying here that he's against someone writing a letter of recommendation. In fact, he often in his letters recommended ministers of the gospel who he sent out to serve other churches (1 Corinthians 16:10-11; Philippians 2:19-30).

It appears that Paul is addressing those in the church who were projecting on Paul what they in fact were guilty of themselves. The super apostles were the ones that were exalting themselves by putting Paul down and falsely accusing him.

These super apostles were all talk and no actions. They were

eloquent in speech but they had nothing of substance which demonstrated that they were speaking in Christ. And because there was no spiritual substance behind their talk, they relied on other things, like letters of recommendation—letters that could be falsified or exaggerated.

Notice that when asking his probing questions that were no doubt aimed at his detractors, he wrote, “*Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?*” (2 Corinthians 3:1b)

When Paul asked, *do we need, as some do*, letters of recommendation, he’s likely speaking of the super apostles. Letters of recommendations, which could be falsified, were the kind of things they relied on to convince others of their credentials.

But Paul didn’t need to rely on such things. He didn’t need to rely on shady tactics. He didn’t need to because first of all he trusted God, and secondly because the Corinthians knew first hand the kind of man that he was. In fact, because of the kind of man that he was, the fruit of his ministry among them was proof enough that Jesus was at work in and through his life.

Notice that Paul continues in verse two: “*You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all*” (2 Corinthians 3:2).

Unlike the super-apostles, Paul didn’t need letters of recommendations. The believers in the church of Corinth were his letters of recommendation. The proof that Paul was ministering in Christ, was the transformed believers in the church who were being manipulated by self-appointed ministers among them.

It must have been painful for Paul to know that the church he planted through great self-sacrifice was now questioning his qualifications because of these shady false apostles. But because Paul genuinely loved this church, despite of all their flaws, he would not write them off. Rather, he wrote to them and was planning to visit them again to strengthen and restore them.

Now Paul not only identifies the Corinthian believers as his living letters of recommendation. He also explains how these letters were crafted. Concerning these living letters, he adds at the end of verse two: *“written on our hearts, to be known and read by all”* (v.2b).

In verse 3, Paul reiterates that they are living letters from Christ because of what the Spirit of God is writing on their hearts. But notice also that Paul didn't just say that they were his letters of recommendation because of what the Spirit was doing in their hearts. He wrote: *“You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts”*(v.2).

Oh, what Paul is saying here is that the Holy Spirit was not only writing on their hearts; the Corinthians believers were also written on Paul's heart. Paul's love for them was such that he couldn't get them off his mind.

Remember, Paul related in the previous chapter that because Titus did not meet up with him in Troas with a report from Corinth, his spirit had no rest (2 Corinthians 2:12-13). In other words, like a mother of a soldier in a time of war waiting for news from the battle field, Paul was anxiously waiting for news from Corinth about the welfare of his spiritual children. When I hear on the news that there was a police shooting, I'm texting my sons, who are all police officers, asking if they are alright. And my spirit is not at rest until I hear back.

I want to submit to you that unlike Paul, those super apostles who wanted to have the authority and admiration that Paul had in the church, were not up at mid-night anguishing in prayer, and writing letters to the Corinthians with many tears. Notice in 1 Corinthians 4:15 Paul wrote, *“For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”*

The Corinthians were living letters from Christ because the Spirit birthed those living letters through Paul's Christ-like heart and ministry. Paul was not the author of the living letters. Rather, the Spirit was. But

Paul was the pen, the Spirit-filled instrument that God used to write them.

Remember, that Paul also wrote in Galatians 4:19: *“my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!”* (Galatians 4:19).

How many of you know that we have many so-called ministers of the gospel today who love to preach, but do not love the people that they’re preaching to.

We have many professing Christians who jump from one church to another or one pod cast to another searching for an appealing, more comfortable, and entertaining message, but their hearts have never been broken over the spiritual ruin in their communities.

Brothers and sisters, unless like Paul our hearts are broken over the lost state of humanity, unless we anguish over the spiritual ruin in our world, unless we have no rest in our spirit until God uses us in restoration, we will not see many spiritual births—we will not see many living letters from Christ being written by the Holy Spirit.

We need to desperately invite God’s Spirit to break us.

This brings us to a second way letters from Christ are made:

2. Living letters are created (authored) by the Spirit of Christ

After explaining to the Corinthian believers that they were his letters of recommendation and that they were written on his heart, Paul continues:

“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 Corinthians 3:3).

Notice that in the first line of verse 3 Paul declared to the Corinthians, who were his letters of recommendation, *“And you show that you are*

a letter from Christ...” In what way were the Corinthians Paul’s letters of recommendation from Christ—proof that Paul was commissioned by God?

As Paul explained throughout his letter, the Corinthian believers were being transformed into the image of Christ from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). They were new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Although they struggled at times, they had godly sorrow over their sin, which produced a repentance that led them to salvation. And this salvation was shown in that it gave them a forgiving heart and an earnestness to obey the Lord in all things no matter the cost (2 Corinthians 7).

Moreover, their costly obedience to God was compelled not by the fear of man, but by the love of Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

Now although Paul was the human instrument that brought many of the Corinthians to Christ and helped them grow in the Lord, he was not the author of these living letters from Christ. The Holy Spirit was the author.

As Paul explained at the end of the chapter, when the Corinthians turned to Jesus, the Holy Spirit removed the veil over their hearts and set them free to behold the transforming glory of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

Brothers and sisters, if you’ve come into a saving relationship with Jesus, you also are a living letter from Christ. As Paul explained, you are a letter from Christ that is written not with pen and ink, but by the Spirit of the living God (v.3). And as Paul explained in verse 2, you are a living letter written by the Holy Spirit *to be known and read by all* (v.2).

So, let me ask you, like the Corinthians, do you **show** that you are a letter from Christ? Oh, brothers and sisters, when people *read* you

what is your life saying about Christ—about who He is—about what you believe about Him?

God saved us and put His Spirit inside of us not only for our sake but for the sake of our families, friends, co-workers, neighbors and strangers. He saved us so that we become letters of hope from Christ to a world filled with people who have never picked up a bible.

Do you realize that as a living letter from Christ you're the only bible some people will ever read? You're not the only thing they need to read. But often, the reason people pick up a bible and begin to read it is because they read something in the life of a Christian that compelled them to do so.

The Corinthians were no doubt a work in progress. And yet, Paul said, "*And you show that you are a letter from Christ...*" Are you living proof of the power of the risen Christ? Is there something about the way you love, forgive and serve that attests to a divine power at work in you?

Our stories are still being written. No doubt we are all a work in progress. But if we avail ourselves of the means of grace by which the divine author of our faith fashions His letters, people will read Jesus in us and be drawn to the story that only He can write through our lives.

This brings us to our final point, namely, living letters are couriered (delivered) by the servants of Christ.

3. Living letters are couriered (delivered) by servants of Christ

Notice how living letters from Christ are brought about. Paul writes in verse 3: "*And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us...*" In what way are letters from Christ *delivered* by servants of Christ?

The Greek phrase translated *delivered* in verse three can also be literally translated *ministered by us*. Let me repeat, Paul was not the author of the letters from Christ, but he was a servant of Christ that brought the gospel message to Corinth.

He was the courier that not only delivered the good news of Jesus, but also the vessel God used to plant the church in Corinth and to serve the church in love so that they could become letters from Christ to the world.

So, in a sense Paul was the instrument that God used to produce and deliver living letters from Christ to Corinth. In fact, the Corinthians were already written on Paul's heart before he even got to Corinth. And of course, Paul himself was a letter from Christ delivered by the Holy Spirit to Corinth to be known and read by all.

Beloved, if you're saved, like the apostle Paul, you have received the Spirit not only to be transformed into the image of Christ, but to also make and deliver letters from Christ.

However, we cannot deliver what we are not also becoming through the Spirit.

Now, although like Paul we are to deliver letters from Christ, we are not the authors. Again, Paul writes in verse 3 that letters from Christ are *written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts*" (2 Corinthian 3:3).

Notice that Paul emphasizes that letters from Christ are not written with ink or on tablets of stone, but by the Spirit *on tablets of human hearts*. We will unpack this more next week.

But the contrast that Paul makes between tablets of stone and tablets of human hearts alludes to a key difference between the law of Moses and the law of Christ, or between the Old Covenant that God established through Moses and the New Covenant established through Christ.

Under the Old Covenant the law of Moses that governed the people of God was written on tablets of stone. Under the New Covenant the law of Christ is written on human hearts. This New Covenant, which provides an internal heart transformation and not just an external written law, was promised in Jeremiah 31:33. Jeremiah prophesied:

“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33).

Commenting on this passage, Kent Hughes explains, “The problem with the old covenant was that it was external. Its laws were written on stone. As such they provided no internal power to live them out. Of course, there were great benefits in memorizing God’s word. Psalm 1 and 119 eloquently testify to the benefits of knowing the Law, because it can guide and influence the heart. But inscribing the heart was far beyond the power of unaided man. Something far more radical was needed—a spiritual operation.

Our hearts [as believers] become radically new. God has written his law within us. He has made us to be partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). True, we still battle with our fleshly nature, but as members of Christ’s Body, our spiritual inclinations are matched to God’s law (John 14:15-17; 16:12-13). They are no longer external and foreign to us, but internal. The New Covenant promises a new heart, a new relationship, a new knowledge, and true forgiveness! All of this vast ministry of the Spirit, was what brought Paul to the Corinthians with full-blown realities of the New Covenant.”

Remember that the Corinthians were not only living letters from Christ written with the Spirit of the living God, the Spirit also inscribed the Corinthians on Paul’s heart. They were written on the very core of his inner being. He couldn’t get them out of his heart and mind. He loved them, flaws and all. He loved them with a love from Christ.

O, how many of you know, because of the love of Jesus, who laid His life down to save sinners, redeemed believers are written on God’s heart. Regarding His redeemed people, the Lord said, *“Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. 16 Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;”* Isaiah 49:15-16a

O brothers and sisters, as Paul also explained in Romans 8:34-35, because Jesus died, was raised and is seated at the right hand of God interceding for us, no tongue can condemn us and nothing can separate us from the love of God. He will not forget you. We are written on God's heart.

Now apart from the work of the Spirit in our hearts, we will not only lose patience quickly with people and write them off, we will also write ourselves off. We will grow weary of doing good and lose heart. We will give up hope of ever becoming the godly men and women Christ saved us to be.

But as we will see more next week, it is Christ in us who makes us sufficient in all that He called us to do. As we behold His glory in the word, in prayer, and in community, the Spirit transforms us into letters from Christ to be known and read by all.

And not only that, as we draw near to Christ, His love will write people on our hearts who He wants us to minister His grace to. When God writes people in need of His saving and restoring grace on our hearts, we will not cease to labor in prayer for them. We will not be able to cast them out of our minds. Our spirits will not be at rest unless we know we've done what we could in dependence on the Spirit to deliver them to Jesus.

Conclusion

O may the blessed truth that as believers our names are written on God's heart by the love of Jesus, compel us to seek hard after Him. But let us not just seek Him to make us more comfortable in this life.

Rather, let us seek our Heavenly Father, who will never forget us, to make us instruments of His comfort—to write the names of needy people on our hearts—to make us letters of hope from Christ to a needy world and all to the glory of His name.

Discussion Guide

Letters from Christ
2 Corinthians 3:1-3

Main idea: Growing believers are God's open letter to the world by which He authenticates the saving power of the gospel.

Review

What did Jim Cymbala mean by the following statement? "Our fear as pastors should not be that people might leave our church but rather that they stay in our church and remain unchanged."

Why did Paul refer to some in the church as super apostles? (2 Corinthians 11:5-6)

Assess

In view of the those super apostles, why did Paul ask the following questions: "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?" (2 Corinthians 3:1).

Was Paul against letters of recommendation?

Some in the church were opposing Paul and questioning his apostolic authority. Why didn't Paul write this troublesome church off, a church that he sacrificed so much for?

In what way were the Corinthians Paul's letters of recommendation and letters from Christ? How were these letters written?

What did Paul mean when he wrote that the living letters from Christ were not only written on the hearts of the Corinthians but also on Paul's heart? 2 Corinthians 3:2b

How were living letters from Christ delivered by Paul? (2 Corinthians 3:3)

How does the Holy Spirit make us letters from Christ?

Why and how does the Lord write people on our hearts?

Apply

How does knowing that you are written on God's heart encouraged you? Romans 8:34-35; Isaiah 49:15-16

Although as believers we are also saved to be letters from Christ to be known and read by all, we are still a work in progress. Our stories are still being written.

Praise God for writing you on His heart and promising to finish what he began in you.

What areas in your life need rewriting (change) so that you might better represent Jesus? Confess it to the Lord and invite Him to change you.

Invite God to write people on your heart with His love so that you might relentlessly pursue them for Jesus.

Let's Pray

Scripture-fed, Spirit-led, worship-based prayers.