

The Living Letters
II Corinthians 3:1-3

INTRODUCTION

Our Cod is concerned about the lost world. He is always seeking to get the attention of the lost world and to communicate to it His love. This explains the incarnation. Jesus Christ was God's supreme message of love to the condemned world. This explains the Bible. He inspired holy men to write this book that the world might know of His love and mercy.

But our text suggests yet another way God is seeking to communicate with the lost world. The suggestion came out of a reference to letters of recommendation. Because Paul had been forced to defend his ministry in a previous letter to the Corinthian church, he feared that his critics might accuse him of writing a letter of recommendation for himself. The practice of sending letters of recommendation goes back a long way in history. But Paul denied that there was any need for a letter of recommendation to the Corinthian Church. They themselves were his letter of recommendation. Their very existence as a church was ample proof of the effectiveness of his ministry.

Paul takes this thought of a letter of recommendation and expands it. He affirms that each Christian is actually a living epistle from God to the world in which he lives. It is an affirmation that God gets the attention and communicates His love to a lost world through us. It is really an awesome thought. It adds a new dimension to the Christian life. It brings a deeper sense of responsibility to us. Just how much communication is going on? Just what has the world been reading in our lives?

I. WE ARE THE PAPER FOR THE LIVING LETTER

in that day, letters were written of pieces of parchment. It was the forerunner of our modern use of paper. However, in our text Paul uses a different contrast. "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 the tablets of human hearts." The contrast calls attention to another time when God wrote a message to people. On Mount Sinai, God wrote the law on the tablets of stone that had been provided by Moses. The message of the law was brought down to the people, and brought a sense of condemnation to the people when they were not able to meet the demands of the law.

God is not writing on tablets of stone this time. Rather he is writing on the tablet of human hearts. The word translated "human" here is actually the word usually translated "flesh" in the New Testament. It calls attention to our humanity. The emphasis is not upon our sinful humanity, but upon the limitations that are a part of our humanity. It also emphasizes the contrast between stone and flesh. The stone is unfeeling, insensitive, but the flesh is sensitive.

The word "heart" calls our attention to how God works. God puts something in our inmost being that expresses itself through our lives. It is not something that we add externally, but something that God works internally. He puts it in your heart and then it is expressed through your smile, your words and your deeds.

This says something about our humanity. Most of us are painfully aware about the sinful inclinations of our human hearts. But we need to become aware of the potential that is in us to be used of God. God can use our limited humanity to get the message to the unsaved 'world.

II. JESUS CHRIST IS THE AUTHOR OF THE LIVING LETTERS.

"You are a letter from Christ." In the passage Paul seems to see himself and his ministry as being the pen in the hand of Christ. This is a reminder to us that Jesus Christ does use various pens in writing the letter to the world. For the Corinthians, the primary pen had been Paul. But which is more significant, the pen or the writer? While we might want to save a certain pen because it was used by some important person to sign an important document, the pen would have significance only because of the honor of the person who used it.

The words used here by the Apostle place the responsibility for the writing upon the living Lord himself. We are the paper, but He is the penman. We do not have to compose anything on our own. When we field our lives to the control of the Lord Jesus, he does the writing in our humanity. He is the One with the message.

This focuses on a primary thing the Lord Jesus is doing in us. We must be aware that when the Lord Jesus works in our lives, He has a lost world in view. He is not thinking just about you, but others. If we interpret what He is doing in our lives in selfish terms, we will commit the same error as Israel did in the Old Testament. They interpreted the word of God on their behalf selfishly. They thought that God was doing it because they were special, when He was doing it so that through them a witness might be born to the nations. So it is in us. We are living letters from Christ to the world. Our Lord never loses sight of the world in its lostness.

III. THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE INK IN THE LIVING LETTER

The Apostle just keeps expanding the figure of the living epistle. We are the paper. Christ is the writer. Paul is one of the pens. But the Holy Spirit is the ink in the pen. It is the Holy Spirit who actually implants the message on the paper. Apart from Him, there will be no message on the paper.

"Written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God." This brings into focus the very nature of the Christian life a little clearer. The Holy Spirit, who comes to indwell at the New Birth, is the dynamic and the power of the Christian

life. Jesus Christ does His work in us through His Spirit. You will find Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit used interchangeably in the letters of Paul.

This is most encouraging. The Spirit is the Spirit of the living God. He is God. This means that all of the omnipotence of God is present in Him. Do you see the potential that is in that! You and I have been protesting that we can not do anything in evangelism and outreach. We have used our obvious limitations as an excuse. By the Spirit who lives in us, our involvement in God's outreach in the world is possible. He is able to do all things.

Another encouraging thing is the knowledge of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit who is working through us mightily to reach out to the lost world knows that lost man. He knows everything to be known about him. He knows of the sins of his past. He knows the weaknesses of his character. He knows his fears. He knows the place where he is most vulnerable. He knows exactly what to write in our lives that will get his attention and meet his need. So often we do not understand what the Spirit is doing in us, but he may well be writing a message that someone needs, someone who has been watching us very closely.

This gives us a beautiful picture of what our relationship to the Spirit should be. We are the paper and He is the ink. We are to yield our lives to him like a piece of paper yielding to the author. We let the Lord Jesus write anything on our lives that He knows will catch the attention of the world. He does this through the precious Holy Spirit. He makes the message clear and readable in our lives. He puts it there in such a way that it can never be erased and all will be able to read. He can write it there in all languages.

IV. THE MESSAGE IS THE GOSPEL IN THE LIVING LETTERS

Paul will develop the contrast in the passage that follows. When God wrote on the stone tablets on Mount Sinai, he wrote a word that finally brought condemnation to the world. He wrote the demands of the law. The men to whom the worlds of the law came admired them, but come not live up to them. Instead of bringing life, they brought death. Instead of bringing hope, they brought despair.

Jesus Christ was a different message from God to the world. In Jesus Christ, God sent a message of redemption, love and forgiveness. We are a footnote to the Word God gave in Jesus. We are a footnote that offers proof of the Gospel given in Jesus Christ. We are proof that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation.

In us, it is really validated that God does love sinners. Even though God is working through us, God will not hide the fact that we are sinners from the world. He does not call on us to pretend to be perfect. Rather he gives us such an overwhelming sense of His love through the Holy Spirit, that the world takes

note. They have already noticed that we share their fallen humanity, but what they cannot comprehend is how we can have such a sense of being loved of God while we know that we are sinners. This becomes God's message to them.

In us, they also see validated the power of Jesus Christ to change human lives. The Gospel declares that God can change human beings. He can make sober men out of the drunks. He can make moral man out of the disloyal. He make moral men out of the immoral. He can replace hate with love, bitterness with kindness. We are to be the proof that He can do this. While we are obviously not yet perfect, it will be obvious to all that we have been changed. Our emptiness has been filled with his fullness. God desires to fill you with such an abundant life that everyone who meets you will make note of it. You are to be a deceleration, a living letter, concerning an abundant life through Jesus Christ our Lord. This means that we must always be glorying in Christ Jesus alone, we must make sure that the world knows that we are what we are by His grace.

CONCLUSION.

Are you ready to be the paper on which Christ does His writing? You should make known to Him that you are ready for Him to erase anything, that may need erasing. In our efforts, so often we write that which confuses the world. Let Him write whatever He wants to write on your life, that they might know. You are the only writing paper available to the Lord Jesus.