

The Corinthians as Paul's Letter
2 Corinthians 3:1-3

Ministering in the name of Christ is not easy as we learned in the latter half of **2 Corinthians 2**. It is filled with difficulties and at times it may seem overwhelming, but hopefully in those times we will not quit. But rather let us in those times of difficulty lift our eyes to God and praise Him for the opportunity that He has given us to suffer these things, as we in dying to ourselves daily are led by God in His triumphal procession, becoming for this world the sweet aroma of the knowledge of God and the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.

And are we adequate for these things? Absolutely! We are amazingly adequate for these things if we in Christ, as the captives of Christ, are, in fact, marching in God's triumphal procession. And Paul certainly pointed that out very dramatically in two different ways. First of all, by declaring it to be so at the end of **2 Corinthians 2:16**, and then secondly, by comparing his sincerity in ministry to his opponents insincerity when he called them peddlers of God's Word in **2 Corinthians 2:17**.

Paul's comparison of his adequacy and sincerity in ministry to the inadequacy and insincerity of opponents supposed ministry among the Corinthians in **2 Corinthians 2:17** forms the backdrop of this morning's message. And what is my hope for this morning's message?

My hope for this morning's message is that we might recognize that if we are, in fact, the captives of Christ and are, in fact, choosing to die to ourselves daily, as God leads in His triumphal procession, our adequacy in performing the ministry that God has given us to perform will be amazingly demonstrated as He supplies for us indispensable and indisputable credentials far surpassing any so-called credentials of any pseudo disciple.

So with **2 Corinthians 2:17** as a backdrop for this morning's message, and knowing that Paul had just made a comparison between his adequacy and the inadequacy of His opponents and illustrating that inadequacy by pointing out his sincerity in ministry versus their insincerity in ministry, Paul anticipated that they, in fact, would attack him as an egotistical braggart given to self-commendation based on what he had just said.

Therefore in order to mute this attack as well as to once again elevate his own credentials as a faithful apostle of Christ, he asks two questions in **2 Corinthians 3:1**.

So, what were these two questions? Let me now read for you **2 Corinthians 3:1**. **“Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you?”**

Clearly both of these questions were addressing the attack that Paul anticipated coming from his opponents accusing him of being an egotistical braggart given to self-commendation based on what he had just said in **2 Corinthians 2:17**. So let us now look at these two questions more closely.

First of all, it is important to note that these two questions are rhetorical and from Paul’s mind required negative responses. So let me now once again read for you these same questions, but this time I will provide the anticipated negative responses that Paul felt his questions required.

So, what was the first question? **“Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?”** And what was the required negative response that Paul anticipated? The required negative response that Paul anticipated, based on what he knew to be true and what he believed they also knew to be true, if the Corinthians reflected on it would have gone something like this: “No, you are not commending yourself again. In fact, you have never commended yourself!”

And what was second question? **“Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you?”** And what was the required negative response that Paul anticipated in light of this question? The required negative response that Paul anticipated would have gone something like this: “No, you absolutely do not need any letters of commendation to us or from us in order to establish yourself as a faithful and effective apostle of Christ.”

So, what is Paul’s point? Paul’s point is this: He, unlike his opponents, did not need commendations either from himself or others in order to be received by the Corinthians as a true minister of the gospel and a faithful apostle of Christ. The false teachers, when they invaded Corinth, may have carried in their hands such written commendations, but Paul did not need them. And why was this? Paul did not need them because he had far superior

credentials that did, in fact, identify him as a true and effective minister of the gospel of Christ.

So, what did Paul have that the false teachers didn't have? Paul had credentials of the heart authored by Christ and the Holy Spirit; indispensable credentials necessary of all true gospel ministry.

So the question that I would like to ask this morning is this: What indispensable credentials did Paul have that made written commendations on behalf of Paul unnecessary?

The first credential was Paul's letter (2 Corinthians 3:2). Let me read for you **2 Corinthians 3:2. "You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men."** So let me ask you a question. Not what was Paul's letter, but rather who was Paul's letter? Paul's letter was the Corinthian church, or in other words, the Corinthians themselves were Paul's living, breathing letter of recommendation.

In order to be considered a credible minister of the gospel of Christ and adequate for being the sweet aroma of the knowledge of God and the fragrance of Christ in this world, do we need theological degrees? Do we need a formal ordination certificate? Do we need written letters of commendation from so-called important people? No! All we really need is what? All we really need are living, breathing letters of commendation, or in other words, all we need are people who through our faithful ministry of the gospel and the truths of His Word have either directly or indirectly become Christians and are manifesting enough fruit in their lives, that those who know them or who know of them can see the positive impact of our ministry upon them. This is what gives us credibility.

Do I have such living, breathing letters? I believe I have. Do our leaders have such living breathing letters? I believe that they do. Do you have such living breathing letters? This is a question that you need answer.

And why is this question so important to answer? For it is our living, breathing letters of commendation, those who have come to Christ through our faithful ministry of the gospel of Christ either directly or indirectly, that testify to the fact that we are true and effective ministers of the gospel of Christ and the truths of His gospel and are, in fact, adequate for being the

sweet aroma of the knowledge of God and the fragrance of Christ in this world rather than just pseudo ministers or pretenders.

So who was Paul's letter? The Corinthian church was Paul's letter, or in other words, his living, breathing commendation. And why was this? It was because they, through the ministry of the Apostle Paul, had become Christians. And they, through the ministry of the Apostle Paul, had been changed. Now notice I did not say perfected, I simply said changed. Though they might have been struggling on many different fronts, they certainly, in the mind of the Apostle Paul, were not what they once were.

Let me read for you **1 Corinthians 6:9-11** and see if this was not so. **“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, (10) nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. (11) Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”** In other words, Paul saw them as changed.

And how did Paul feel about the Corinthians? His living, breathing letter of commendation that spoke so loudly about the genuineness and the effectiveness of his ministry and his adequacy for being the sweet aroma of the knowledge of God and the fragrance of Christ in this world? He loved them.

Let us go back and read **2 Corinthians 3:2** one more time and see if this is not so? **“You [the Corinthians] are our letter [our living, breathing letter of commendation], written in our hearts.”** Paul loved the Corinthians.

And were they effective letters of commendation? Absolutely! Let us go back and once again read **2 Corinthians 3:2** but this time we will read the entire verse. **“You [the Corinthians] are our letter [our living breathing letter of commendation], written in our hearts, known and read by all men.”** What is the best advertisement of a minister's genuineness and his adequacy for being the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ in this world? His living, breathing letters of commendation

So, what was Paul's first credential that he believed was better than the hand written credentials of his opponents? Paul's first credential that was better than the hand written credentials of his opponents was Paul's letter, or in other words, the Corinthians themselves.

So, what was Paul's second credential that was better than the hand written credentials of his opponents?

The second credential was Christ's letter (2 Corinthians 3:3). Let me now read for you the very first words of **2 Corinthians 3:3**. After saying, **"You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men;"** Paul goes on to say, **"being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us."**

So let me ask you a question. How could the Corinthians be both Paul's letter and Christ's letter? Though the Corinthians were Paul's letter of commendation, his letter of commendation had been written by Christ. And because Paul's letter of commendation was written by Christ and not by Paul, we can therefore refer to Paul's letter of commendation not only as Paul's letter but also as Christ's letter, which is what he, in fact, did here in **2 Corinthians 3:3**.

We are not the ones who write our living, breathing letters of commendation as we interact with individuals as the sweet aroma of the knowledge of God and the fragrance of Christ. Christ is the one who writes our living, breathing letters of commendation. Yes, we may be the sweet aroma of the knowledge of God and we might be the fragrance of Christ, but it is not us who ultimately brings the positive life giving changes in the lives of those we are interacting with, as we seek to minister in the name of Christ. Rather it is ultimately Christ who does this.

So, what was Paul's first credential that he believed was better than the hand written credentials of his opponents? Paul's first credential that he believed was better than the hand written credentials of his opponents was Paul's letter, or in other words, the Corinthians themselves. And what was Paul's second credential? Paul's second credential was Christ's letter, or in other words, the letter that Christ Himself had written on the hearts of the Corinthians as Paul and his companions, in expressing care, shared the gospel of Christ and the truths of God's Word with them. And what is Paul's

third and final credential that he believed was better than the hand written credentials of his opponents?

The third credential was the Spirit's letter (2 Corinthians 3:3). So let us now go back to our text one more time, but this time we will read, starting with **verse 2**, all the way down through **verse 3**. **“You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; (3) being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for 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.”**

When Paul pointed to Christ as the ultimate author of his commendation letter, it caused him to reflect on what He used to write that letter. And what did Christ use? Christ did not use ink as we might use but rather the Spirit of the living God,

This apparently caused him to compare what the Spirit of the living God had written on the hearts of the Corinthians with what the finger of God had earlier written on the stone tablets of the law.

Isn't this exactly what we see in **verse 3** when Paul said, **“Being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for 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.”**

And what is the implication of this comparison that Paul is making in **2 Corinthians 3:3**? The letter written by the Spirit of the living God on the tablet of human hearts was superior to the letter written by the finger of God on tablets of stone. This is Paul's implication.

So why would Paul think of this new letter written by the Spirit of the living God on human hearts to be superior to the letter written by the finger of God on tablets of stone?

God had promised Israel through the prophet Ezekiel that there was a day coming when He would change their heart (Ezekiel 11:19-20). Let me read for you **Ezekiel 11:19-20**. **“And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, (20) that they may walk in My statutes**

and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God.”

God’s promise to Israel through Ezekiel and to Ezekiel, that at some future time He would change the hearts of Israel, is directly connected to the “New Covenant” promised through the prophet Jeremiah in Jeremiah 31:31-33. **“Behold, days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, (32) not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant [or in other words, “the old covenant”] which they broke, although I was a husband to them,’ declares the Lord. (33) ‘But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’”**

Now we know why would Paul think of this letter written by the Spirit of the living God on the tablets of human hearts to be superior to the letter written by the finger of God on tablets of stone. It was superior because the letter written by the finger of God on tablets of stone could not give those who were seeking to live by it a new heart. But those whose hearts were written upon by the Spirit of the living God, as they responded to the gospel of Christ based on the new covenant in Christ’s blood as promised in **Jeremiah 31:31-33**, would, in fact, be given what they truly needed, a totally different heart. And that was true for the Corinthians. They had been given a new heart when they, through the preaching of the gospel of Christ, embraced Christ as their Lord and Savior and were saved. They were forever changed having become new creatures in Christ.

My hope for this morning’s message was that we might recognize that if we are, in fact, the captives of Christ and are, in fact, choosing to die to ourselves daily, as God leads in His triumphal procession, our adequacy in performing the ministry that God has given us to perform will be amazingly demonstrated as He supplies for us indispensable and indisputable credentials far surpassing any so-called credentials of any pseudo disciple.

And what are those indispensable and indisputable credentials far surpassing any so-called credentials of any pseudo disciple? Those indispensable and indisputable credentials are the people that have been changed through our

proclamation the gospel of Christ and the truths of His Word as Christ writes on their hearts with the Spirit of the living God in such a way that they are forever changed, not only passing from death to life but becoming new creatures in Christ.

Are we adequate for the ministry the God has given us? These living, breathing commendations written by Christ with the Spirit of the living God on the hearts of those we are chosen to engage declare that we are.

May God give us the grace to understand that the credentials of a true minister of the gospel of Christ will be far superior to any written commendation.