

"ARE YOU A LIVING LETTER?"



TEXT: 2 Cor. 3:1-6

INTRO.: A. In the last several verses of the previous chapter Paul had spoken of a triumphant ministry – now he writes of a true ministry. He had written of victory, now he writes of validation.

B. There were those in the church at Corinth who questioned the validity of Paul's ministry, the genuineness of his apostleship and the strength of his authority. Paul seems somewhat irritated (and rightly so), that those he had personally led to Christ and had nurtured would challenge him. As he writes this 2nd epistle he asks: *Knowing of my ministry as you do – how dare you question me, my sincerity, my calling and my authority.*

C. He will ask a few pointed questions designed to bring conviction to them and to let them know of his frustration with them.

I. LETTERS OF COMMENDATION: V.1

A. Definitely Unnecessary:

1. Paul states emphatically that he doesn't need letters of recommendation or commendation to present to them.

ILLUS.: He insists that he had sufficiently demonstrated his validity and authority. V.1a He states that he doesn't need "epistles of commendation" to present to them. Paul had a Spirit-called & Spirit-directed ministry and his accomplishments spoke for themselves! Especially in Corinth! He had personally led many of them to Christ & established the church there.

Some preachers identify themselves with certain "Christian celebrities" in order to confirm their ministry. They have letters commending them from these famous preachers. Perhaps by doing so they think some of the fame of their brethren will rub off on them. While the Bible does say "let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth..." Prov.27:2 – any praise should be unsolicited.

2. Paul further says that he certainly didn't need letters of commendation from them to bolster his ministry.

ILLUS.: Paul had dealt with the carnality of the Corinthian church in his first epistle. This principle is why we do not seek accreditation from worldly organizations for our church or school ministry. It would be like the National League of baseball seeking accreditation from the Little League! Our commendation must come from the Lord. Why would we seek the approval of the public school system or the world with their immorality, evolution, anti-God philosophy, and anti-Bible stance?! Should we adopt their conduct, dress code, profanity, blasphemy, or agnosticism or outright atheism?! God forbid!

II. LIVING LETTERS: v.2,3

A. The Epistle – Believers v.2a

1. Paul says that they are the only letters of commendation he needs.
2. Their transformed lives are "living letters" which should be all the confirmation he would need.

ILLUS.: Even with their carnality, they had shown evidence of the new birth. They were indeed "living Epistles." The most carnal Christian has a testimony which he cannot escape. You belong to Christ due to redemption, and you cannot get away from that fact in the world. The question is, what kind of "living letter" are you?! Is your message negative or positive?

B. The Readers – All Men v.2b

1. Unbelievers “read” believers; they watch their lives to see if they are genuine
2. You are a “living letter” whether you want to be or not; what do men “read” from your lifestyle?

C. The Agency – The Spirit v.3a

1. Paul reminds them that the vehicle was not a pen dipped in ink, writing on a parchment, but the ministry of the Holy Spirit within.
2. He states that they have been “manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ” despite their carnality and their attitude towards him.

ILLUS.: Paul did not judge these carnal Christians as being lost; he viewed them as “broken” or out of adjustment. This is a lesson for us. Let’s not “throw away” those who do not always agree with us or those who even hurt us. View them as “broken” and do what you can to repair them & make them useful again.

D. The Writing – Clear v.3b

1. There was something about these believers in Corinth, in spite of their carnality and their failures and even their criticism of the great Apostle, that spoke of their new birth.
2. There should be some evidence, no matter how small, and in spite of the imperfections, so that others can see Christ in us, the hope of glory!

E. The Tablets – Their Hearts v.3c

1. Paul’s mention of “tables of stone” refers to the Old Covenant symbolized by the 10 Commandments written by God on stone tablets.
2. Paul does not diminish the O.T. Law of God, as we shall see, but rather uses it as a comparison to something better where God’s Law is written in the heart of the believer.

III. LIFE-GIVING LETTERS: v.4-6

A. The Letter-Carrier (Paul): v.4,5

1. When previously (2:14-17) dealing with his triumphant ministry, Paul asked the pointed question ***“And who is sufficient for these things?”***
2. He answered his own question partially in 2:17 and completes the answer in v.5.
 - a. Paul denies any self-sufficiency in winning others, including the Corinthian Christians to Christ.
 - b. He is showing that any success (***“victory”***) he has had, was of divine origin

B. The Letter-Originator (The Spirit): v.6

1. Paul makes it clear that it was the Lord who enabled Him (his calling was his enablement).
2. In contrast to the ***“tables of stone”*** (the Old Covenant), Paul speaks of the new testament or covenant.
3. He further contrasts the two covenants when he speaks of the ***“letter”*** vs. the ***“spirit.”***
 - a. The O.T. Law was “holy, just and good” – but it only showed man a perfection he could never attain; it condemned sinners & could never save them, for “by the Law is the knowledge of sin” and “all have sinned.”
 - b. There is a “letter” and “spirit” regarding the new covenant also & believer who only live by the letter of N.T. precepts fail to live as the Savior desires.
 - c. The Law said ***“The soul that sinneth, it shall die...”*** but the new covenant says ***“The gift of God is eternal life.”***

CONCL.: You ARE a **“LIVING LETTER”** – the question is how does your letter read? What do men see when they read your life?

**“You’re writing a Gospel, a chapter a day,
By deeds that you do & words that you say.
Men read what you write and watch what you do,
Say friend, what is that Gospel according to you?”**