



## Letters to the World

Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> December 2024

2 Corinthians 3:1-3

Did anyone write to you this Christmas? I mean, more than just a standard Christmas card wording? Maybe they mentioned the tough year they have had; maybe some heartfelt words to encourage you; maybe news of exciting events, of something they're looking forward to in the new year.

These letters bring connection or reconnection. They are designed to ensure your story has meaning and value and is heard by others. After all without being heard we end up lonely and that can be a very dark thing. However, let's go to 2 Corinthians 3:1-3

1

Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some *others*, epistles of commendation to you or *letters* of commendation from you? <sup>2</sup>You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; <sup>3</sup>clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, *that is*, of the heart.

Paul opens with two questions. These follow a statement in verse 17 of chapter 2 of two things – 1, he was commissioned by God and 2, everywhere He spoke of Christ it was always within the sight of God.

And this is where his two questions come in. Firstly, he asks am I starting to sound like I'm trying to justify why people should listen to me?

Once again, Paul resists quoting himself, his qualification, or even his title as a reason why the church in Corinth (or any of us) should listen to him.

The second question is similar to the first, asking whether he should bring a letter from someone else to the Christians at Corinth to assure them they should listen to Paul. These letters were common in the Ancient Greco-Roman world to establish trust and credibility especially when travelling or conducting business.

2 Paul takes up this cultural feature and quickly turns it into an illustration of the means by which God has designed for the gospel to reach beyond the edge of Christmas, beyond the walls of the church, and into a world that is already feeling the hope of a Christ-less Christmas fading into dimly lit January days.

3 Now look again at verse 2,

You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men  
The word epistle, means letter. Three things to notice. Firstly, you, Christian, are the letter. There is a message from God within you and visible through you as His Spirit works in you.

4 Back in Chapter 2:15 Paul affirms,

For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.

5 To God you are the fragrance (or aroma) of Christ in this world. Some do not like it and some will embrace it. Some will want to know of the hope. As Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:15,

6 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always *be* ready to *give* a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear;

Not everyone will ask. But some will. Some will see that sense of eternal hope by which you live and they will ask – why are you always so hopeful; why doesn't all this negativity get you down?

And so the letter is 'known and read by all men'. Now we need to be careful not to presume that being known by people and, to use the metaphor, being read by people, does not mean they will care for the Jesus we serve or want to hear your testimony.

7 So it is vitally important you **do not rely on the response to 'the letter' to form your sense of value, purpose, or worth.** Otherwise that will create a contradiction – you say this gospel is good news but when rejected you act as if it is not good news.

8 How to combat this is found in the last verse of our text today, verse 3,

clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.

9 Firstly, being a letter of Christ – you have no other Saviour, no other Healer, no other Teacher, no other Messiah, no other Victor, no other Master. He alone is the 'author and finisher of your faith'.

10 How does this letter take on the form that Christ intends? After all it's not like I have a perfect reputation in the flesh? The answer is found in the answer to another question – **what is the purpose (the goal) of Christian ministry?**

11 Galatians 4:19 says,

My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you

It is the formation of Christ in the heart, body, and mind of every believer. Every moment in ministry is to be about the transformation from what we were into who He is. This process is happening even now and is described in 1 John 3:2,

Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

You see it is the revelation of Jesus Christ that causes the transformation of the believer to say with confidence, "we shall be like Him!".

Let us be confident in this. Even in the valleys and the desert places where He must cleanse us of the unlikeness of Christ, are a part of the this. Now be sure of this until Jesus has returned and you and have seen Him face to face, you have not been fully made into His likeness. This happens even as we go.

Thirdly, this letter, is written as Paul said,

not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God

14 **The Spirit creates the imprint within you that the message will first change you and remain within you** that others will see the transformation and the Author and realise, there is no way you could have pulled this off.

15 Fourthly, this isn't like the carving of the ten commandments into tablets of stone. In Ezekiel 36:26,

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

16 And in Jeremiah 31:33,

I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

And that is so your confidence should be in the Lord who drew wise men from a distant land, revealed Himself through a virgin mother, spoke to nameless shepherds and convinced Joseph to stick around for the whole story.

17

**So let us move forward as letters with a message that will far outlast even the best Christmas present.**

18

Let us go with confidence.

1. Know who God has said you are
2. Know who God is making you to be
3. Do not place your confidence in the response of people to the letter
4. Take every moment to pray and share in such a way to see Christ formed in other believers
5. Understand the formation of Christ is like giving birth – tougher and more painful than any other experience.
6. Be a letter that even the illiterate can read.