

You Are Our Epistle.

Text: 2 Cor 3:2

Suggested Hymns:

440, 353, 371, 286, 829

- 1) No Finer Recommendation Is Given
Than By The Christian Lives You Live
- 2) Our Christian Faith Is Not Just A Personal Thing.
- 3) The Life You Live
Is Your Epistle To The Whole World
- 4) Actions Speak Louder Than Words

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is 2 Corinthians 3:2, ² *You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

It seems quite certain that Paul stood in constant communication with his church at Corinth while he was still preaching in the larger city of Ephesus. A rather lively correspondence between the apostle and the Corinthians seems to have taken place.

One of Paul's problems was this, that he was compelled constantly to defend himself against his enemies. No matter where Paul went, the enemies were right at his heels, and their mode of attack was a cowardly one. They tried to undermine Paul's work by attacking his character and by questioning the authority of his apostolic office.

They said to the converts of Paul, *"Who is this Paul? Where does he come from? He wasn't one of the Lord's twelve apostles! What authority has he to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ? He tells you that you do not need to observe the Ceremonial Law, and that you do not need to be circumcised. Do you realise that he isn't dealing honestly with you?"*

But he is playing the game safely. He was circumcised when he was a boy. This man Paul is taking you in. He is simply telling you the things that you like to hear and making religion easy for you in order to build up his organisation.

It is a good thing for him, but it isn't a good thing for you. What letters of recommendation does he have? What authoritative documents can he show that he is what he presumes to be?" Such was their attack.

Paul had heard that these enemies had also made their appearance in Corinth. Probably the Christians had written to him about them. And now they said to Paul, *"What shall we tell the people when they come with arguments of this kind?"* Paul replied in 2 Corinthians 3:1-2, *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? ² You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men.*

May the Lord bless our meditation as we consider that we are the Lord's epistles, known and read by all people.

1. No Finer Recommendation Is Given Than By The Christian Lives You Live

Paul does not need official letters of recommendation because he has something much better. The believers in Corinth themselves are Paul's letter. Does Paul have to commend himself? Not at all. He simply can point to the tremendous change that has taken place in the lives of the Corinthians and especially in their status before God.

In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul had written, *⁹ 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 homosexuals, nor sodomites, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you.*

That was the picture of the Corinthians before Paul arrived. In that same section of 1 Corinthians Paul describes the change that had occurred after he preached the Gospel to them, ***But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.***

In other words they were a people washed clean in baptism, set apart from the unbelieving world, declared righteous and holy in the eyes of God — that was the letter Paul could carry with him everywhere he went. This was a letter written, not with ink on tablets of stone. This was a letter that had been written

by the Holy Spirit of the living God on tablets of human hearts, the hearts of the Corinthians whom the Holy Spirit had re-created into new people in Christ.

The Corinthians were "*Christ-letters*," the result of our ministry, says Paul. Paul carried these letters deep in his heart, for the Corinthians were very dear to him, but he was also ready to display them at a moment's notice, much like proud parents or grandparents are quick to pull out pictures of their children or grandchildren.

The Corinthian believers themselves were his credentials. He needed nothing more. With these words Paul, is really showing the Corinthians how unwise it would be to accept the message of strangers who had to bring letters of recommendation but in the process wanting them to turn away from Paul. Through Paul's preaching of the Gospel the Holy Spirit had made them living letters of recommendation. What they were right now was the result of Paul's ministry. Why, then, should they turn to those bent on destroying that ministry?

Paul believed that the greatest evidence that he could give to the world for the fact that he was preaching a message in which there was the power of God were the reconstructed lives of his converts, and that was particularly true of the converts in the city of Corinth.

These people had been partly pagan and partly Jewish. The Jews had gone to the synagogues, observed the Ceremonial Law, and so, in greater or lesser measure, relied upon themselves for the working out of their souls' salvation.

They knew nothing about Jesus as the Saviour who had come and who had suffered and died and risen again from the dead for the redemption of their souls. And the pagan element in the Corinthian church had been followers of the various idolatries practised in this area. They had lived in the sins and vices which were current in Corinth at that time. Corinth was known throughout the world of that day for its evil and immoral manner of life.

Out of these people Paul had won converts, and when they became converts, they came to be new people. A mighty miracle took place in their lives. They now believed in the Christ who had come. He was to them the glorified and resurrected Lord, the Way to the Father, without whom they could find no forgiveness and no salvation.

And having found this Christ, their hearts were filled with love to Him. They came to be new creatures in the lives they lived. What previously had been a matter of common amusement and enjoyment now was hideous sin. No longer were they found in the temples of the idols.

And Paul said, *“What further recommendation do I need? You are my best recommendation. You, with your converted hearts and your changed lives show that I have been preaching to you a message in which there is the power of God unto salvation. Now let the enemies say what they will. You are our epistle.”*

2. Our Christian Faith Is Not Just A Personal Thing.

The statement, *“You are our epistle”* is a statement tremendously significant for us as professed Christians. From this we see that our Christian faith is not just a personal thing.

It is a personal thing, certainly; nothing in the world could be more personal than your Christian faith. Nobody else can believe for you. You must believe yourself. No one else can live a Christian life for you. You must live it yourself. You are the one who personally and directly receives the benefits of such Christian faith and such Christian conduct.

You have within your heart the assurance that your sins are forgiven. You can say, *“I know that God loves me, that I am His child, and that through Him I can have the sweet hope of an everlasting life. I know that all His promises of love apply to me. I know that He leads me and guides me; and although dark things loom up in the pathway of life I also know that with His presence and guidance He is going to make all things work together for my good.”* Christianity is a very direct and very personal thing.

However, it is not just a personal thing. Your responsibility as a Christian goes beyond your own person. *“You are our epistle”* our text says. You are to be a letter of recommendation for the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the religion of the one true God. By the professions you make and the life you live you should show to the world what the beauty, the glory, the power, of the religion of Jesus is.

3. The Life You Live Is Your Epistle To The Whole World

We do this in various ways.

Firstly, we do it by professing, confessing and declaring our faith in Jesus Christ. When men and women who are being received into the membership of the Church step to the baptismal font and receive the Sacrament of Holy Baptism or kneel at the Lord's altar and profess their faith in Jesus Christ, in the Triune God, they by that very act become a letter of recommendation for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

When you on a Sunday get ready to come to this house of God and the neighbours see you drive away, and when others watch you as you enter this place of worship, you by that very act become a letter of recommendation for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

That is a confession that these things mean something to you. It means that the Gospel is the Bread of Life for which your precious immortal soul hungers. It means that you rejoice and delight in drinking the cup of living water. It means that you gain comfort and cheer and inspiration from the message which is proclaimed here.

Secondly, in an even more direct and more personal way still, we should become a letter of recommendation for the religion of Jesus. If you have a husband who has not as yet learned to know Jesus as his Saviour or a wife who does not as yet possess the saving knowledge of the Redeemer, you should become a letter of recommendation for the Gospel-message.

This is not done by arguments or by harsh words, but by simply telling in your own words, in your own way, what the Saviour means to you. How He comforts you, cheers you, and fills you with hope.

We should be such a letter of recommendation to our children by showing them that the Christian religion is a living thing in us, that it is something of eternal significance for us, and that we recommend it to them as our greatest joy and our most priceless treasure.

Thirdly, even beyond the confines of our home we should serve as such a letter of recommendation. Our social contacts in the world are numerous. We have them with our friends, our neighbours, our fellow-employees, and others.

In all these contacts we should realise that we cannot be satisfied just to think, "*I am a Christian; I know my Saviour,*" but that we are rather to be a letter of recommendation for the religion of Jesus Christ and make a confession of the things that fill our hearts which God has given to us.

4. Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Our confession of faith in Christ is not to be limited merely to words, to saying what we believe and what religion means to us. This is a situation in which actions speak even louder than words, a situation in which we by the lives we live, by the things we do, should become a letter of recommendation. And for this there is endless opportunity.

We are living in a world which is consumed by selfishness. Such a thing as love is quite an unknown quantity in a cold, cruel, selfish, grasping, greedy world, in which each one thinks just of his own shrivelled little self.

But you have received the love of God, you have been privileged to look with eyes of faith upon Jesus, who loved you and saved you. The love which you have been shown by God must be reflected in a life of love.

When others are seeking just their own end, thinking only of themselves, there must be something beautiful, something distinctive, in your life which shows what the transforming power of Christ's love has done for you. And thus you become the Lord's letter of recommendation.

We are living in a day and in an age in which sins of uncleanness are being taken for granted, just as they were in the days of Corinth. At that time transgressions of the Sixth Commandment meant nothing. They were part of the every-day life. We have just about reached that same point again in Australian society.

However you are to be different. You are to show by the pure life you live, by your spirit of modesty and chastity, and by your loyalty and fidelity in the bonds of marriage what the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is, when it has gripped and changed a human heart. Thus you will become a letter of recommendation for the religion of Jesus Christ your Saviour.

We have in present-day society a great deal of immoderate living, in the matter both of eating and of drinking. This is one of the great moral problems confronting the Australian people today.

But, you should show that you, as a child of God, are able to use with moderation and with gratitude whatever the gifts of God may be, whether they be those of food, or drink, or clothing, or anything else.

You should show that your life has been transformed. Then instead of accepting the low standards of the world, you should be the light of the world, pointing the way. By your life of moderation you are to be a recommendation for the power of Christ's saving Gospel.

May the Lord open our eyes so that we may come to see the Christian religion not only as a personal thing, to be personally enjoyed, but as something which, we by our lives and practises, should commend to, and share with, our brothers and sisters!

If we are such a letter of recommendation, then our lives will truly reflect glory upon God's holy name and contribute rich blessings to our fellow-men. May God help us to be fine letters of recommendation for Jesus' sake! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.