

Two Important Letters.

Text: 2 Cor 3:1-3

1) The letter of Justification

Suggested Hymns:

2) The letter of Sanctification

277, 327, 218, 289, 348

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 3:1-3, *¹Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you? ²You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; ³clearly 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.* (NKJV)

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

Dear friends in Christ,

In a Chinese village there lived a little girl near the home of a Christian missionary. She had never heard the missionary preach, but she took notice of how he lived. She saw how he associated with the poor and lowly, and how he tried to help them. He visited the sick, read to them, and offered them comfort from a big black book. She noted how the man would cheer the hearts of people weighed down with troubles, dealing kindly with everybody he met, including children, most of whom were his good friends.

One day she visited the mission school with some other girls. The teacher was telling the class about a man who went about doing good, helping the poor, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, one who especially loved little children, and the children loved to come to Him.

“Do you know who this man is?” asked the teacher at the end of his story. *“Oh, yes,”* answered the little girl, *“that is the missionary who lives in our village.”* This girl had never been told about Jesus, and she felt that the missionary fit the description.

That is what St. Paul wants to bring home in our text, *²You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; ³clearly you are an epistle of*

Christ. In other words, live your daily life so that people cannot fail to see much of Jesus Christ in your life.

The Apostle Paul had a graphic way of bringing home a truth to his hearers. Recall how he made those sceptics and cynics of Athens sit up and listen to his discourse on the resurrection, in spite of themselves, by alluding to the altar they had erected to the Unknown God.

Note how, on another occasion, he sharpens the attention of the Corinthian Christians by urging them to strive for the crown of life with the zeal of the athletes who in the Isthmian games contested for the victor's wreath. These athletic contests were well known to the average Corinthian of that day. And so here again the Apostle uses a well-known custom to drive home a lesson on consecrated living.

It was customary for teachers of that day to carry letters of commendation, listing their credentials, when they passed from town to town, to identify themselves.

It seems that some people laid a charge against the Apostle Paul that he went from place to place without presenting his credentials. They therefore thought he was assuming an authority for which he had no warrant.

The Apostle's reply was that God Himself put His stamp of approval upon his work among the Corinthian Christians and that he therefore needed no recommendation written by men. His many converts were his best recommendation. His letters of commendation were written by God upon the human hearts of people who lived the truth which he preached. And so he calls his converts, *our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men ... are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God.*

Jesus, our Saviour, places two letters into the files of God for every man born of woman. The one is the letter of justification, which tells what He has done for us to make us right with God. This letter is already finished, written not with ink, but with His holy precious blood. This letter is already signed, sealed, and approved by God. Yes, it is engraved on the very heart of God.

The other letter is still being written by Christ upon the hearts of men. Its contents depend upon how people receive Him into their hearts and lives. Let us

now study the contents of these two important letters. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Letter Of Justification

Natural man is not equipped to cope with his spiritual enemies, sin, death, and the devil. Nor can man atone for his offences against God. His own efforts, magnificent though they may seem to him, cannot atone for sin.

Human agencies of rehabilitation, the social gospel, philosophy, our modern educational system, our streamlined courses of self-improvement, our advanced culture, our industrial development, our military might on land and sea and in the air — all these, change things outwardly, but they do not change or remove the wickedness of the human heart, the root of all evil.

Without God, man vainly strives for peace. Let us thank God that He in His mercy, in spite of man's refusal to live with Him, saved fallen man and reopened paradise to him. How this was done is beautifully described in God's letter of justification. Through the church year we read its pages, so full of comfort and blessings. In hopeful anticipation we see, in the Gospel proclaimed to us, the Son of God writing the pages of this letter.

In holy awe we stand under His Cross on Calvary during the Passion season, studying its crimson-stained last page very intently, enthralled by the words, *“He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.”* On Good Friday we study the last sentence of that letter, written with the precious ink of His holy blood, *“It is finished.”* With this epistle of salvation, signed and sealed, Jesus entered the Holy of Holies to report to His heavenly Father. And God the Father with a bold hand writes across the face of that report: Accepted. Well done!

Proof of that acceptance is Jesus' resurrection and His living, victorious presence in heaven. As we lay down those divine lines in grateful contemplation, we can come to only one conclusion: Jesus died for all people so that we who now live shall not live to ourselves, but to Jesus who died for us and rose again. And now that second letter.

2. The Letter Of Sanctification

Our text says, 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.* We are now living letters of Christ, made such through Baptism and regenerating faith.

Each day Jesus writes a page upon our hearts. *“For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.”*¹ As a potter models the clay into the shape he wants the vessel to have, so Christ, through the Gospel, shapes our lives. The fruits of Christ’s redemption are, to speak with Luther, *“That I may be His own, live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness.”*

You are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us. As St. Paul brought the Gospel to the Corinthians, so all true ministers still bring the message of Christ’s salvation to men. Through the saving Gospel the Holy Spirit regenerates sinners so that they give themselves to Christ to live in His kingdom and serve Him. Where this Word really enters the heart, it produces fruit, as we read in Galatians 5:22-23, ²² *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,* ²³ *gentleness, self-control.* These fruits cannot be hid. They show up in the world around us. Christians follow Christ. The love of Christ constrains them to live to Him. And their service to Him is not forced, but spontaneous.

What are the changes wrought by the Spirit of Christ? When the Spirit of Christ really rules in the hearts of man, He impels them to forget wickedness, selfishness, fleshly desires, and fills them with serving love. When the finger of God writes upon the hearts of men, things happen. See what changed men the Apostles were when the Holy Spirit guided and moved them on the day of Pentecost.

Later, this same Spirit moved Peter to say with deepest conviction: *“For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.”*² In self-consuming devotion John the Baptist declares, *“He must increase, but I must decrease.”*³ Paul did not want to know anything that would rob him of the blessings of Christ Crucified.

And look at the zeal of those early Christians. They would take in and nurse sick and abused slaves, who were thrown out to die by their heathen masters.

Christian slaves would pray for their masters under the stroke of the lash. The Church prayed for and obeyed the government that persecuted its members. Christians refrained from the lusts and excesses of the heathen world around them. They let the world know that they were followers of Jesus.

They originated the practice of caring for the sick, the needy, and the physically incapacitated. At first they took care of them in their homes, and later they erected hospitals, orphanages, and homes for the unfortunate. Organised charity was unknown before the day of the New Testament Church.

And what missionaries they were! Wherever they went, they spoke of the blessings and peace which the Gospel of Christ had brought them. And this in a world in which the ruling minority mercilessly oppressed the masses and exploited them most shamefully.

Why did the Christians do this? Because their life was vitalised by the power of Calvary's Cross. Their motto was, "***I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.***"⁴ The early Christians sought to remember the day of the death of their loved ones, the day of their birth into heaven, rather than the day of their birth into this life.

You are our epistle ... known and read by all men. The greatest joy and reward of a pastor is to see his congregation a living example of the power of God. Pastors feel themselves highly blessed that God has chosen them, in spite of their weaknesses, to be His agents, His instruments, the pens with which He writes upon the hearts of men.

With true humility they know it is not their ability, their wisdom, that turns people from sin to righteousness, but rather the power of the Gospel, which they proclaim. They say with the Apostle, ***Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God.***⁵ Therefore systems of administration, social activities, and other activities have a place on the program of a Christ-centred pastor only, in so far as, they enhance the ministration of the Gospel.

Remember that Christ is working in you. In Holy Baptism the image of Christ has been impressed upon your souls. They have become His spiritual letterheads, and your heart, as it were, His spiritual stationery. At your mother's knee, later under the guidance of Christian pastors and teachers, in the weekly

service and Bible instruction, the divine Penman inscribes His way of life upon your heart.

At times some parts of this letter need a certain emphasis. With the blue pencil of sickness, economic loss, or some emotional disaster He may remind us that we stand by His grace alone and that His strength is made perfect in our own human weakness.

Sometimes it is with the red pencil of war that He stops us in our course and asks us to be still and know that He is our God. Crosses, trials, spiritual upheavals, all these go into the writing of this soul epistle called our life. And, oh, what a time the divine Writer has to make us understand what is really good for us!

Unfortunately, God's work is often hindered. Before the art of printing was invented, monks in the cloisters wrote the Bible in long-hand. The letters were embellished with pleasing scrolls and colourful shadings. But such writing cannot compare in beauty with the pages which Christ is endeavouring to write upon your heart, when He comes to you in His Word.

Sadly, this beauty too often escapes our carnal eyes. And what shameful ingratitude when we rudely take the pen out of God's hand to do a little writing of our own! Our indifference to the Word of God, our jealousies, our greed, worldly-mindedness, our vanity — how they blur the writing of the divine manuscript, blotting out much of its beauty, power, and grace.

Too often we make foolish insertions into this letter, changing the meaning and influence of the divine pen. What confusion, disaster, pain, and sorrow come into the epistle of our lives because we so often write portions of it ourselves. Jesus has this in mind when He teaches us to pray, *"Thy will be done."*

How much better would be our church attendance, how much more eager we would be to live the consecrated life, how much more fervent our missionary zeal, if we always followed the Word of God and showed a sympathetic interest in our fellow men!

How the world would then sit up and take notice and, in spite of itself, be influenced by our devotion. There are two things which practically everybody is fond of reading — the newspaper and the lives of other people.

But the only Word of God many people will ever read is what they see in the Christian's life. The unbelievers can avoid reading the epistles written by the Apostles, but they must notice the difference between their own sinful life and that of a sincere child of God. Do the people of this world see a difference between your life and theirs? If so, is it a difference indicating that the power of God's Word is working in you?

What makes matters worse is that if we do not draw people to Christ, we keep them from coming into His kingdom. We become shirkers, retarders, and offenders. One of the most severe indictments found in the Bible is the Lord's solemn statement in Revelation 3:15-16, ¹⁵ *"I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot."* ¹⁶ *"So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth."*

The peace and joy of devoted service to God and to the suffering fellow man makes for a more abundant life. Let us be our true selves, doing the will of God!

Another page of Christ's epistle in you is in the making. Yes, let your heart be more than a mere letter. Let its sin-hardened texture be gradually transformed by the divine Sculptor so that you become ever more like Christ.

Out in the Black Hills of South Dakota stands Mount Rushmore. Out of its flint-like granite pinnacle, after years of tireless carving, finally emerged the features of Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, and Theodore Roosevelt.

Are you letting the Mount Rushmore of your heart be chiselled and transformed after the image of the Triune God? As Scripture says, may *"we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord," [be] "transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord."*⁶ Amen.

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

¹ Proverbs 23:7

² Acts 4:20

³ John 3:30

⁴ Philippians 4:13

⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:5

⁶ 2 Corinthians 3:18