

# “Living Letters”

- 2 Corinthians 3 -

by Pastor Tim Dodson  
at JF Believers Church  
in Menomonie, Wisc  
on Oct 17, 2021



**2 Corinthians 3** 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; 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. 4 And we have such trust through Christ toward God. 5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as [being] from ourselves, but our sufficiency [is] from God, 6 who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. 7 But if the ministry of death, written [and] engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which [glory] was passing away, 8 how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? 9 For if the ministry of condemnation [had] glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. 10 For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. 11 For if what is passing away [was] glorious, what remains [is] much more glorious. 12 Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech— 13 unlike Moses, [who] put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. 14 But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the [veil] is taken away in Christ. 15 But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. 16 Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord [is], there [is] liberty. 18 But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

**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?*

Paul’s claim to the authority that he held as a pastor and missionary was not based upon someone else’s letter of recommendation. It wasn’t because Paul knew important people who could inflate his qualifications and history. Nor was it because he was able to convince them through fast talk and smooth words of self-promotion. Paul, *as am I as a pastor*, was relying on the fruit of his ministry to give credence to his calling.

He wasn’t dising education or even the practice of proving oneself in the ministry and then being “sent out” by that ministry. Paul wasn’t advocating a Lone Ranger practice of acquiring the position of pastor. But he also wasn’t going to talk up his work or himself. For the fruit of his ministry was like an open letter easily read by all men, those redeemed and those yet in the world. He was “out there.” He was transparent and quite public.

Now on the flip side of this, there have been many men who have attempted to use this passage to support their lack of ministerial credentials, but that is not what it says. This passage is speaking of *recommendations*, the fine accolades of men. Ministerial credentials are not such, but rather are the acknowledgment of completed training. They come through mutual agreement of organizational authority, personal accountability, and also experiential training and testing. There is much to be said concerning the blessings of faithful partners in ‘like ministry’ who have witnessed, in full combat, the call of God upon the individual’s life.

I know of many “self-anointed” pastors who “went Rambo” out there because they did not have the experience, the credibility, the invested time, or the overall training to step into such a roll. Instead of righteously journeying through it, they attempted to make an “end run” and get themselves a plastic badge from the internet and a hobby lobby pastor plaque for their door.

**3:2** *You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men;*

Usually those without such credentials attempt to use this passage along with high, righteous phrases like, “I just answer to God, not to men.” Really? Well, the apostles did not operate in such a manner!

**Galatians 2:9** *“In fact, James, Peter, and John, who were known as pillars of the church, recognized the gift God had given me, and they accepted Barnabas and me as their co-workers.”*

**Acts 6:6** *“(These new ministers) whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.”*

Paul in **Galatians 2:1-2** *“Then fourteen years later I went back to Jerusalem again, this time with Barnabas; and Titus came along, too. I went there because God revealed to me that I should go. While I was there I talked privately with the leaders of the church. I wanted them to understand what I had been preaching to the Gentiles. I wanted to make sure they did not disagree, or my ministry would have been useless.”*

**Acts 15:4** *“When they arrived in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported on what God had been doing through their ministry.”*

**1 Timothy 4:14** *“Do not neglect the spiritual gift you received through the prophecies spoken to you when the elders of the church laid their hands on you.”*

**Acts 13:2-3** *“One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the special work I have for them. So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way.”*

1 Timothy details the life requirements of those seeking such human blessings as well as the warnings to those who would give or embrace them flippantly. Ultimately, Paul was declaring that a man’s call is manifested through his life, his ministry, as well as his journey to it. If my path to the pulpit is riddled with rebellion, self-interest, no accountability and “carnage” ...if I refuse human accountability and authority in my life, it’s difficult to say that God has called me! All the denial in the world does not change the fact that God uses men. It is His plan, design, and government! With all that being said, in the end, the fruit of my ministry speaks of the final affirmation of my calling or it speaks of the lack of it. It speaks not just in numbers of people, but scriptural adherence, and mature, disciplined, and reproducing Christians.

We also cannot ignore that reality of what each and everyone of us is saying with our own life and living. Anyone can of course “talk the talk.” But what is our lives saying? Do we “smell like Jesus” when we are out in the public domain?

**3:3-5** *“...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. And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God...”*

The church in Corinth was a “living letter” to all the world, just as all of you are today. Your living is speaking something to a lost and dying world. Such dynamic exists because God willed it to be so and if we are willing, He pours His Spirit out upon us and thus His very dynamic through us. Such a reflection is *the* manifest reality of Christ, His transformative power, as well as His Holiness. This is what Paul was standing upon...not talk, but rather the proof of what he and others had conducted there.

It is true that it was not just an issue of what Paul **was** there, but also what Paul **did** there. It was a church that ventured beyond the theory, the emotions, the “prayer-closets,” the Sabbath gatherings and even the going into the streets. It was a church born out of sweat, effort, and foot work, and they had the harvest to show for it.

However, it was not simply an issue of “muscle.” Their “marching orders” had to be initiated by God and be manifested in their hearts through Christ. Thus, for Paul and for us, it has to go beyond just physical effort. Sheer numbers in the pews were great, but we know such can be contrived through the efforts of men and secular productions. But all the work in the world will not make up for God’s calling, His blessing, and His personal involvement. The proof is in the *product*, that’s the bottom line. Quality...*not just quantity*. Who and what I am as a pastor, ...who and what we as a church. For our spirit and maturity, is made visible, made known to all, through public interaction and biblical adherence.

**3:6-8 “...who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written [and] engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which [glory] was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?”**

Paul begins to expound further about the ministry in general. He began by establishing the legitimacy of his own place in the pastorate, and now he goes on to speak of the place of the church in the ministry of the kingdom.

The believers in the church in Corinth were coming out of old Jewish traditions and were apparently having a hard time letting it go. Man, *religious man*, has always had a difficult time embracing true grace. Grace is the free, undeserved, *and further*, **unearned** love of God toward us. But in our natural state, we always inexplicably feel the need to add to the cross. We feel the need to add something of our own: some little works, some self-sacrifice, a few extra rules just to hedge our bet and to take credit for some part of our redemption. We add whatever we can to the mix so we feel like we have done something to deserve His love and earn His sacrifice.

The Corinthian believers were no different. In fact, they had been raised in such an environment, and our childhood church experiences are hard to shake. Paul was a minister of the new covenant. He knew that...*and taught thus*, that the rules, the regulations, the law, ...all had been fulfilled in Christ and Him alone. These things were free gifts, and Paul was delivering the message.

However, it was a daunting task to overcome years of living by the law. It was God who had equipped them all for the “challenge” of living by grace and grace alone. Indeed the law, in its time and place, had a “glory.” It was a way to stand righteous before a holy God. A way to provide a “snapshot” of God’s character and holiness. But it also was a way to show that, *even with man’s best efforts*, he or she could never meet that ultimate standard. I have always believed that such a plan was designed to prove to us that we could never make it on our own. Men tried for hundreds of years to follow those rules and meet the standard, but it was a miserable failure! Hundreds of years of trying to be good enough and to follow all the rules and regulations, and yet every single person failed. Everyone failed until God did what we could not.

For God moved to bridge the gap between us and Himself by sending a pure and unspotted individual to come and be our proxy, our “ringer.” God sent His Son. Literally, God Himself came to do what we could not. He came to be perfect, to fulfill all the rules of holiness that would establish a perfection that would allow us to stand in God’s presence. Jesus Himself fulfilled the law for us. He did this completely, absolutely, and forever.

Now today we are under a new covenant, an agreement with God that says if we are willing to allow Jesus Christ to stand before God in our place, to be judged in our place, **God will receive Him as our proxy**. Such a deal is extremely good for us because He was, *and is*, perfect. And may I remind you today, **we are not**. This is His grace. Yes indeed, if we are saved ...if we will seek Him to stand in our place...then we will begin and continue to grow to take on His qualities and attributes. We will begin to more and more “smell like Jesus.” We become a living letter that speaks to the world that Jesus is real. As Paul says, *isn’t that glorious?*

Yet the truth is, the path to establish this principle was hard. Not *difficult* in its content, but hard to embrace, for it flies in the face of the “can do” spirit that has made us Americans: the independent *and oft rebellious* spirit

that is inherently found in mankind. From the garden to our own childhood we have been recoiling from those who would help us...those who would hold our hand, for we want to “do it ourselves.”

**3:9-10 *For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels.***

The Living Bible helps give us clarity, saying “*If the old way, which brings condemnation, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new way, which makes us right with God! In fact, that first glory was not glorious at all compared with the overwhelming glory of the new way.*”

Paul refers to the path of the law as the “ministry of condemnation.” And indeed it was! And why wouldn’t it be if everyone failed to hit the mark! Yet it was the perfect righteous standard that was required to stand before God, but we couldn’t make it; we weren’t up to the challenge! Why would God put us through it then?

He did it because it was actually what we wanted. Read the Old Testament account! We wanted to do it ourselves. At least to *add* to it all. We **wanted** the hoops to jump through, just as many of us want them now, and we often seek out a religious experience that provides for such. We wanted to be right with God, but on our own terms. The people in the Old Testament didn’t really want to have a *relationship* with God. They said, in effect, “Just give us the rules, and we’ll step up to the plate!” Men wanted and still want to earn their standing with God, and sadly, so many are still trying. God let us, to prove that no matter how hard we tried we would fail without Him stepping in.

God was patient and allowed a less-than-perfect record to exist between us. There was glory because we had God in our midst. Man sacrificed and sacrificed. We tried to stay on top of it all, and keep the scale weighted in our favor. God waited for hundreds of years until the picture was clear to us all. We can never be right enough in ourselves to stand before God. We *needed* redemption and by someone bigger and grander than us.

**3:11 *So if the old way, which has been replaced, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new, which remains forever!***

It did one thing for sure: this all made the grace of God look really good! This “new deal” that God has offered sounds almost too good to be true. I surrender to my ineptitude, turn from my sin, and allow Him to do in me what I can never do myself. I allow Him to wash away the guilt of my sin, hand Him the clean slate of my life, and He rewrites my future. I love Him and He loves me back. “...*how much more glorious is the new...*” We become the “living letter” to a dying world. A letter of great hope and joy. Are you that kind of a letter today?

**3:12-16 *Since this new way gives us such confidence, we can be very bold. We are not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so the people of Israel would not see the glory, even though it was destined to fade away. But the people’s minds were hardened, and to this day whenever the old covenant is being read, the same veil covers their minds so they cannot understand the truth. And this veil can be removed only by believing in Christ. Yes, even today when they read Moses’ writings, their hearts are covered with that veil, and they do not understand. But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.***

Paul seems to hardly be able to contain himself. It’s as if he is holding the winning lottery ticket! “*Hey, gang! If this is true, then we should be bold with this message! We have both salvation and abundant life through the new deal God has offered us.*”

Once Moses came down from his meeting with God where he received the Ten Commandments, the radiance that he embodied began to fade. Moses...*who represents the law*, placed a veil over his face so the people would not see that the glory was fading. Many people however want to keep that veil over the law, *yes, even over our ‘new’ law* today. They don’t want to admit that we aren’t yet where we should be before God ...that the glory is not there...and that the systems that we hold to, *those of works and rules and regulations*, will never

make us righteous before God. They don't want to admit it, and they don't want anyone to see the holes and the cracks! So they stay "veiled"...hidden from the world around us. Secret agent Christians.

When we turn to God and His grace of love, this "veil" is removed. The world will then indeed see all our spiritual 'warts and scars' but they will also see the glory and grace of God's love and power and what that does to a person. We are set free in His love and the world can now see clearly the eternal glory of God, the eternal glory of the gift of grace, the living salvation by grace. We then are His letter to the world. We are his billboard, shouting out His love.

***3:17-18 For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord — who is the Spirit — makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.***

Those of us who are reborn in Christ now live "in the Spirit." We are told that "in that Spirit," there is liberty. We can see clearly now, no veil to cloud our view, the manifested glory of God. The strangest thing of all is that, like a mirror, we see it in ourselves and in each other. In the glory and the miracle of grace, we become like Jesus! We stand closer to God than ever because grace not only positionally makes us like Christ, but it actually makes us **like Christ!** We are a "living message" to a world that is lost. A letter that says "we know the way home..."