

# SECOND CORINTHIANS

## Chapter Three

### Introduction

Bible teachers traveled from church to church in New Testament times. Many of them were unknown to the congregation they were visiting. A discerning congregation would ask the teacher upon his arrival for a letter or letters of commendation from leaders who were well-known to them. I think you'd agree that this was a wise precaution to take in order to eliminate the possibility of receiving false or heretical teachers.

The apostle Paul refers to this practice in verse one when he twice speaks of "epistles" or "letters of commendation." But he is *not* commending them for requiring letters of commendation. They are asking **Paul** to provide letters of commendation to verify **his** ministry!

Paul had evangelized Corinth. Then he spent eighteen months there establishing the new believers. After he left, other teachers came to Corinth. Among them were teachers that commentators call "Judaizers." They combined Judaism with Christianity and taught that a Christian must also keep the Jewish law in order to be truly saved. Their teaching was contrary to Paul's message of salvation by grace through faith apart from keeping the law. In order to discredit Paul in the eyes of the Corinthians, they produced letters of commendation for themselves and asked the believers if Paul had ever produced any such letters. He had not. Confused and deceived, the believers at Corinth were asking Paul to validate his teaching among them by providing them with letters of commendation.

Paul tells them, in verse two and three, that he can produce hundreds or perhaps thousands of letters of commendation:

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

**The believers at Corinth were Paul's letters of commendation – living letters, living epistles.** Each of them had been radically and miraculously transformed by receiving the Gospel Paul preached. All anyone had to do was “read” the lives of any of the believers to verify that Paul's message was true.

**You and I** are such living letters. **You and I** are to be read by men as we live and labor for the Lord. They read about two things: the promise of righteousness through Jesus Christ, and the power of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

The promise of righteousness through Jesus Christ, and the power of a relationship with Jesus Christ, will be our topics this morning.

#1 Your Life Is The Letter People Read To Learn About  
The Promise Of Righteousness Through Jesus Christ  
(v1-11)

A simple definition of righteousness is how to *get right* and *stay right* with God. Paul's preaching and teaching was the ministry of righteousness:

1. When Paul ministered by preaching the Gospel, people got right with God.
2. While Paul ministered by teaching, people were taught how to stay right with God.

After Paul left, the Judaizers came and taught that you could only get right and stay right with God by keeping the Jewish law.

This is not an isolated, first century issue. It is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. Nothing could be more important than knowing how to get right and stay right with God. We need to understand why Paul was right and the Judaizers were wrong.

2 Corinthians 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?

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

The Christians at Corinth were the only letters Paul needed to commend his ministry. Nevertheless, he was looked down upon for

not having letters of commendation from the spiritual leaders of his day. I want you to consider the apostle Paul for a moment and realize that he would probably not be respected today, either. He spent most of his time in jail; he never earned enough from the ministry to purchase a home; he never built a church building; he frequently had to get a job to support himself; he admitted that he was a poor public speaker; and he had an unattractive, unimpressive appearance.

We still look for letters of commendation today, but they are normally letters after someone's name – the abbreviations for their bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degrees. They do not commend anyone any more than Paul needed letters to commend him. The people whose lives are changed for time and eternity – those are the real letters of commendation.

2 Corinthians 3:3 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.

*The life of every born-again believer is a letter from Jesus Christ.* Jesus ministers to you through some means – usually a person sharing the Gospel. As you receive Jesus Christ as your Savior “the Spirit of the living God” comes into your heart. His presence there produces radical, miraculous changes from within.

Paul refers to the “tablets of stone,” the Ten Commandments, upon which God wrote an important portion of His law. God wrote on those stone tablets; but now He writes on “tablets of flesh” – on human hearts. It is a contrast between something *external* – the law – and something *internal* – God's Spirit. The law was and is an external standard you were commanded to conform to; the Spirit is an internal power that is given to transform you. It should be obvious that having the indwelling Spirit is superior by far to having an external law.

2 Corinthians 3:4 And we have such trust through Christ toward God.

2 Corinthians 3:5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as *being* from ourselves, but our sufficiency *is* from God,

The law leads some people to the pride of self-sufficiency and thinking you can please God by your outward works. You can't! You should instead read God's law, see your insufficiency, and be

thankful that the Holy Spirit lives in you to enable you to walk with God in humility.

2 Corinthians 3:6 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.

The law is the “letter” which “kills.” The new covenant is the internal empowering of the Holy Spirit Who gives you life and the power to obey God from within.

What is the “letter,” and why does he say the letter “kills”? In verses seven and eight he calls the letter the “ministry of death” and the “ministry of condemnation.” The law is God’s standard of righteousness that is revealed in the Old Testament. What, exactly, is God’s standard? In order to get right with God and stay right with God under the law you must perfectly keep every tiny portion of God’s law. God’s standard of righteousness is **sinless perfection!**

**No one** can attain God’s standard of righteousness; **no one** can maintain it. Since no one can attain or maintain God’s standard, it only ministers condemnation and death. In Galatians 3:10 you read,

Galatians 3:10 ... “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in **all things** which are written in the book of the law, to do them.”

If you are in any way less than perfect, you are “cursed” - condemned to death by God’s law. The law kills you.

2 Corinthians 3:7 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,

2 Corinthians 3:8 how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?

God’s law was and is “glorious.” It was so glorious that when Moses came away from his meetings with God, his face radiated. Something interesting about his glowing for God: *It faded away!* The fading of the glory of God in Moses’ face was to symbolize that God’s law was temporary. It was given to fade away and be replaced by the superior “ministry of the Spirit.”

2 Corinthians 3:9 For if the ministry of condemnation *had* glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory.

2 Corinthians 3:10 For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels.

2 Corinthians 3:11 For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.

The law of God is a “ministry of condemnation.” It can only expose your sin and leave you condemned. You can never get right with God or stay right with God by your own efforts at keeping His law. You cannot achieve righteousness by keeping the law...

**But you can receive righteousness by accepting the Lord!** When you stand condemned by God’s law, you see your need of a Savior. Jesus Christ is your Savior. When you accept Him, God declares you righteous. You are justified by grace through faith, apart from the law.

There’s a short poem I love to quote which expresses this better than anything I have ever read:

*“Do this and live, the law commands,  
but gives me neither feet nor hands.  
A better way the Spirit brings:  
He bids me fly and gives me wings.”*

Would you rather be condemned trying to keep the letter of the law... Or be declared righteous by grace through faith in Jesus Christ? The answer is obvious.

You, as living letters, are to reveal this promise of righteousness through Jesus Christ. When people “read” your life and labor for the Lord, they should *never* get the impression that Christianity is about rules, rites, rituals, and regulations. They should *never* read from you that being a Christian is a life of effort to keep God’s external law. They should read in you that Christianity is a life of empowerment by which God Himself enables you to do what He has commanded.

Paul talks about the empowering of the indwelling Spirit in the remaining verses.

#2 Your Life Is The Letter People Read To Yearn For  
The Power Of A Relationship With Jesus Christ  
(v12-18)

Let me begin by giving you the conclusion. Look at verse eighteen:

2 Corinthians 3:18 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.

The phrase “beholding as in a mirror,” literally means, *reflecting, as a mirror does...* Paul declares that you see God face-to-face in the Person of your Savior, Jesus Christ. You “all” see Him – every Christian. As you do, over the course of your lifetime, you are “being transformed” by the indwelling Spirit “into the same image” you see in Jesus. **You are becoming more like Jesus!**

Have you ever seen a married couple who, after many years of living together, begin to look and act alike? If you will spend time with Jesus, over your lifetime you will “look” and act more like Him. The simple secret of the Christian life is looking into the “mirror” to see Jesus. The mirror is God’s Word.

2 Corinthians 3:12 Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech –  
2 Corinthians 3:13 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.

Paul gives an inspired commentary on Exodus chapter thirty-four. Moses put a veil over his face and the Jews of his day did not see the fading of the glory of God. Because of the veil over Moses’ face, the Jews could not see that the letter of the law was fading away and would one day be replaced by the ministry of the internal, indwelling Spirit. He applies that truth to the Jews and Judaizers of his day in verses fourteen and fifteen:

2 Corinthians 3:14 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.  
2 Corinthians 3:15 But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart.

Just as the veil hid the fading glory from the Jews in Moses’ day, a *spiritual* veil was and is over the hearts of the Jews and Judaizers. They could not see that the letter of the law had faded away and been replaced by the new covenant of the indwelling Spirit. It is not, however, impossible for Jews to be saved:

2 Corinthians 3:16 Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

When a Jew receives Jesus as Savior, he immediately understands that the old covenant has faded away and been fulfilled and replaced by salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Why, then, would

anyone – Jew or Gentile – want to go back and try to keep the law as a means of righteousness? You'd be foolish to try, and false to teach it.

2 Corinthians 3:17 Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty.

This verse is too often the victim of Scripture abuse. People quote it to justify all manner of wacky, weird behavior – claiming that they have “liberty” in the Holy Spirit to act wild and crazy.

What it really means is this: You are liberated from the condemnation of trying to perfectly conform to God's external law and are instead being transformed from within by God's indwelling Spirit.

There may not be Judaizers in the church, but there is still too much self-sufficiency and reliance upon external rules. Far too many believers are trying to find a program that they can successfully follow in order to become more spiritual. Christianity is not a program you follow in your own self-sufficiency. It is a Person you follow in His sufficiency.

## Conclusion

Paul said that the simple secret to the Christian life is to look into the mirror of God's Word and see Jesus. You will then reflect the image of Jesus that you see.

Too often, however, you see the wrong image of Jesus! I still hear messages that condemn; that motivate through guilt; that emphasize what you must do for God rather than what He has done for you. If this is the Jesus you are shown and see, this is what you will reflect – *and it's not Jesus as He is truly revealed in Scripture!*

Pastor Gayle Erwin has devoted his life to a study of the nature of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. His books, “*The Father Style*,” “*The Jesus Style*,” and “*The Spirit Style*” are must reading. Concerning the nature of God the Father he likes to quote from Exodus thirty-four – which, incidentally, is the same passage Paul refers to in this chapter!

Exodus 34:5 Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD.

Exodus 34:6 And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,

Exodus 34:7 maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin..."

Is that how you see your Father in the Word?

Concerning the nature of God the Son, Jesus Christ, Gayle Erwin summarizes the Bible's teaching into these characteristics: Jesus was a servant Who never lorded over others; He was a humble example; He was as the least and as the last; He used no force; He was not driven by blind ambition; He made Himself of no reputation; He was obedient to the point of death. Is that how you see Jesus in the Word?

These words describe God the Holy Spirit: He is your comforter; He abides and live with you forever; He is the Spirit of truth; He dwells in you; He is your teacher; He testifies of Jesus; He guides you into all truth; He does not speak of Himself; He shows you things to come; He always glorifies Jesus. Is that how you see God the Holy Spirit in the Word?

You will reflect the Person you see. Make sure you see God as He is truly revealed by the mirror of the Word.