

## SESSION 17: LETTERS, PART ONE

2 Corinthians 3:1-3

August 10, 2025

### **PREFACE**

Letter writing is, sadly, fast becoming a lost art form. By “letter writing” I mean someone purposely sitting down to compose a thoughtful, well-organized piece of correspondence, consisting of complete sentences grouped into logical paragraphs, employing reasonably proper grammar and appropriate upper- and lower-case typography. Ideally this letter will be written by hand—in the hand of the person expressing his or her sentiments—but can also be typed out for better legibility. (The means by which the letter is written is less important than its content.) A letter will also include some form of introductory greeting, and not just begin, coldly, with the body content. It will also include, at the end, some form of a signature, the writer identifying him- or herself, and taking responsibility for the content of the letter.

We now live in an abbreviated society. The thoughtful compositions of yore—think those between John and Abigail Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Winston Churchill, Georgia O’keeffe, C. S. Lewis—have been replaced by the sometimes insensible shorthand of social media posts and text messages. I wouldn’t be surprised if we were already approaching the time when a younger generation will not even know what a “letter” is—much as they today have no comprehension of a black-and-white television or party-line telephone connection.

If you are one of the many who protest, “Oh, I haven’t the time to write a proper letter; I’m too busy,” then I suggest you make the time to read some biographies of *extremely* busy people, such as Winston Churchill, Theodore Roosevelt, John Adams—all of who hand-wrote *reams* of correspondence and other documents every day of their lives, in addition to writing books and personal journals.

Letters are a substantial way to communicate ones thoughts, affection, important information, and are written with the understanding that they may be stored away for posterity’s sake. They reveal not just information to the addressee, but the character and personality of the writer. We know many famous people primarily from the correspondence they penned.

Our current study is of a letter—a proper letter. It has a greeting and a signature, albeit in locations different from our practice today; it was composed by hand in complete sentences grouped into paragraphs; and, most important, it was written by someone with a view to its importance—not just immediate, but for posterity’s sake.

In this letter the apostle Paul makes a remarkable statement in v2 of Chapter Three: “You are our letter,” followed in v3 with “you are a letter of Christ.” Even more astonishing is the fact that the “you” in both of these statements refers to perhaps the most troubled, divided, quarrelsome church in Christendom at the time.

With its opening of a rhetorical question, Chapter Three seems to begin a new thought, but really the first paragraph of Chapter Three flows logically out of the last paragraph of Chapter Two. And I would put it that it all has to do with *God’s flowchart of grace*. That is, *How does God work out His purpose among people? How is He accomplishing salvation (or offering salvation) for human beings in the world?* And, as George Guthrie puts it, “*What legitimizes a Christian ministry claiming to be ‘sent by God, living before God, in Christ’?*” (2:17) Let me read the two paragraphs together, beginning with 2:14.

### **Read 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:3.**

In v17 of Chapter Two Paul makes a preliminary and summary statement that sets up the next few chapters:

- Unlike the false apostles in their midst, he does not corrupt or sell the gospel;
- in contrast, he is **sincere**: “It is not so much the absence of duplicity or hypocrisy, as it is having a fundamental integrity and transparency” (Spicq);
- instead of conducting ministry for profit, his impetus is **from God**: “a profound sense of accountability to God for the ministry he conducts, [living out] his ministry with reverence and humility, keenly aware...that he was ‘ever in the great Taskmaster’s eye’ (Milton)”;
- and he “preaches the message about Christ from the standpoint of a profound relationship *with Christ*.” (Guthrie)

**Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you?**

Once again we have an English word, used by all our common versions, that can be a bit misleading. The first definition of the word “commend” is to entrust, to put in the care of another. After that, the word means to express approval of, to praise—which is probably what one today thinks of first. So we might think Paul is saying, in the first sentence of the verse, something like how the *Contemporary English Version* renders it, “Are we once again bragging about ourselves?”

But the second definition of the word strikes the correct note: “to mention as worthy of attention.” That is, to recommend. In other words, what Paul is talking about is what the British refer to as a CV—*curriculum vitae*—or an American resume: that is, one’s *qualifications*, intended to introduce or establish someone. Very often this would be submitted by someone else, as Paul does a number of times in the NT.

### **Read Romans 16:1-2.**

He does it again later in this letter to the Corinthians regarding his disciple and messenger Titus.

### **Read 2 Corinthians 8:16-19.**

A few commentators agree with Tyndale that the first sentence should not even be a question, that Paul is stating outright what he is doing: “We are starting to recommend ourselves to you again!” (Guthrie) Understanding that Paul is not bragging, brings much clarity to his motives and purpose; as he did in his first letter (e.g., 1 Corinthians 2), Paul is simply giving voice to his qualifications for the task he has been called to perform—a common and respectable practice at the time. Because he has had to do it before, he says it is necessary for him to do it “again.”

*Guthrie:* Therefore, when he states, “We are beginning to commend ourselves again,” he asserts categorically that he sees the need to revisit the issue of their mutual trust, in spite of the fact that he and the Corinthians should be past that relational milestone. They should not be listening to criticism against him, but given that they are, he will provide an answer, albeit reluctantly. So his statement that he is commending himself to them again, rather than a denial of inappropriate action on his part, constitutes a use of a common cultural convention and an open rebuke of the Corinthians.

Out of the myriad versions at my disposal, only one—and one I do not typically consult—captures the true sense of the first verse. The *God’s Word* translation renders it

**Do we have to show you our qualifications again? Do we, like some people, need letters that recommend us to you or letters from you that recommend us to others?**

The second part of v1 reflects the turmoil that now exists between Paul and the church. It could be paraphrased, as does David Garland, *Has our relationship sunk to such a low that I must now call upon outside parties to vouch for me?*

## **v2**

I love this verse.

**You are our letter, having been written in our hearts,  
known and read by all men,**

Not long before he died, my dad opened up to me—one adult to another—about how moved he was about something. For most of my childhood dad taught junior high boys Sunday School. Having been in that age group once myself, I can imagine he rarely received much feedback from these boys at the time. There were probably Sundays in which he came away feeling like he had just been teaching to a collection of brick walls—or worse, that his words had vaporized into the ether, having found no purchase at all in those young ears.

But on this day, some time in the mid-seventies, when Linda and I were camping with Mom and Dad near the Tetons, he told me that young adult men had been coming up to him recently, expressing their appreciation for what his teaching and guidance had meant to them during those formative years.

What they were saying, in essence, was that they had become my dad's "letter of recommendation." He didn't need to write one; *they* were his letter. Every one of us is a letter of recommendation for those who have poured their lives into ours. Whether or not any of us still sit down and hand-write letters, the truth is that, especially in Christ, we *are* a letter. For better or worse, our very lives speak volumes. Murray J. Harris says it well.

*Murray J. Harris:* [Paul] insists that for him to carry commendatory letters to Corinth would be completely superfluous. The most complimentary letter he could possibly possess had already been written. ☐ Their very lives as men and women "in Christ," the result of the grace of Christ operative in his ministry were an eloquent letter all could read. They themselves were Paul's testimonial, guaranteeing his apostolic status and authority.

If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 9:2)

We might expect to read "written in (or on) *your* hearts," instead of "in *our* hearts." But remember what we are talking about: a letter of recommendation—his credentials. The person requiring such a letter would invariably be carrying it himself, on his person, for presentation to those who do not yet know him.

So what God has accomplished in Corinth, through the ministry of Paul, is written indelibly in *his* heart, and everywhere he and his fellow apostles go in the world this—their *reputation*, as it were—is "read" by those with whom he comes into contact. ☐

Some of our versions have "on our hearts" instead of "in our hearts," which is OK; the Greek *en* can be translated either way. But I prefer "in" because our dearest affections we hold *inside* our heart—not on its surface.

And returning to those young men speaking to my dad about what his teaching had meant to them, I could easily see that that letter of recommendation from his students had been written in his heart—and held there as a cherished gift so long as he lived. For my part, in his telling I was privileged to represent what Paul describes as "known and read by all men."

### v3

Paul continues and fleshes out his thoughts in v3.

**...being manifested that you are a letter of Christ,  
ministered to by us, having been written not with ink but  
with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone  
but on tablets of hearts of flesh.**

Because in the rest of Chapter Three the apostle will contrast the old Mosaic Covenant with the New Covenant in Christ, most scholars believe Paul draws his imagery for vv2-3 not just from the stone tablets in Exodus, but from Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

**Read Jeremiah 31:33-34.**

**Read Ezekiel 36:24-27.**

We will be developing this further as we proceed deeper into Chapter Three. For now, in v3 we see that our common versions split on what may seem at first to be a minor interpretive variance.

LSB, NASB, KJVs: “you are a letter **of** Christ” (CSB: “you are Christ’s letter”)

ESV, NIVs: “you are a letter **from** Christ”

That is no small difference. The ESV and NIVs speak only of *source*, while the others speak of *content*. “The Corinthians are a letter in which Christ is present” (Seifrid).

Even just on the surface of v3 we can readily see that Paul is drawing imagery from the Mosaic Covenant, but there remains a rich trove beneath that surface—which I will reserve for our next session.