

## SESSION 18: LETTERS, PART TWO

2 Corinthians 3:1-3

August 17, 2025

### **PREFACE**

A number of so-called “apostles” have recently come into the Corinth church, preaching an errant gospel. In addition, there has been a particular member of the church leading a group in opposition to Paul, and even the church local has administered discipline upon this individual.

### **Read 2 Corinthians 2:5-8.**

Paul has, and will, drop into this letter a number of references to the false apostles. He did at the end of Chapter Two.

### **Read 2 Corinthians 2:17.**

These interlopers had unholy, unrighteous motives for doing what they were in Corinth, for the Greek beneath the word *kapeleuontes* (“peddling”) speaks of a dark process: a huckster, corrupt (KJV), to deal in for purposes of trade, to water down (as in selling diluted wine), falsify.

As the apostle continues his thoughts into our Chapter Three, he again makes a subtle reference to these individuals in v1.

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

Paul customarily refers to his opponents in impersonal ways—“as some” here, and “like many” in 2:17.

Then the bulk of Chapter Six is an extended treatise comparing false teachers against true teachers of the gospel, with its central statement being at v14.

### **Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-16a.**

In Chapter Ten and Eleven the apostle really gets up a head of steam in his defense against these false apostles, where he uses the same word—“commend” (*synistemi*)—he has used at the start of Chapter Three.

### **Read 2 Corinthians 10:12, 17-18.**

Let's now return to our passage in Chapter Three.

### **Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-3.**

#### **vv2-3**

Verses 2 and 3 comprise one sentence.

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

Based on the reasonable assumption that Paul is not lying, these two verses paint an encouraging picture of the Corinth church. Yes, there are problem members, and yes, there are ne'er-do-wells in residence fighting against the work Paul has accomplished and hopes to accomplish. But there remains a fair number in the church—perhaps a majority?—that stands by his apostleship and, far more important, stands with Christ and His gospel.

Verse 2 begins with the apostle stating that they are “our letter,” that is, “Paul’s apostolic credentials lie in them and their faith, which has its boast in God’s work in and through Christ” (Seifrid). Paul says to anyone who asks, *You want to see my qualifications, my resume? Look at the church in Corinth.* This means that, at root, the church is, as Paul extends this imagery in v3, “a letter of Christ,” so much so that it is “being manifested”—it is evident to all, it is visible for all to see (*phaneroumenoi*).

Whereas vv1-2 focus on the apostle and his reputation (or perhaps better stated on the effectiveness of his ministry), it is as if in v3 Paul shakes that off as a less-important conclusion and focuses more on what this means for the reputation of *Christ*. Put one way, in v3 Paul reverts to being simply “the channel of an act,” which is the picture he painted at the end of Chapter Two.

### **Read 2 Corinthians 2:14-17.**

God spreads the fragrance of the gospel *through* the apostle to the world; sometimes it takes, sometimes it is rejected, but it is always offered authentically “from God” and “in Christ.” It is the real thing.

And where Paul is going with this in the following verses is that the gospel message is nothing less than a New Covenant God is making with the world in Christ. What stands out in this passage is the truth that we *all* are “channels of an act”—which is where I began our study of this third chapter: It 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 the answer to this is that He does it through individuals—not salvation itself, but the *message* of salvation—from those who are “in Christ.” In this context, Paul delivers the gospel message to the people in Corinth, some of whom become a church. Then that church—as a cohesive unit, but also as a group of individuals—passes on that gospel message to the community at large, and far beyond that through their reputation as “a letter of Christ, ministered to by [the apostles], having been written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God.”

**Let me pause here for a moment to interject a thought.** I am most grateful for the almost endless resources available for the study of God’s word, including a vast bounty of scholarly commentators. A layperson such as myself is beholden to them for their knowledge and thoughtful understanding of biblical truth.

Some times all these scholars agree; some times they all disagree. When they disagree it is up to the teacher/pastor to decide who puts forth the most convincing argument, and teach that. Some times, however, they don’t necessarily *disagree*, but they all head off into different directions, offering thoughts generated by different aspects of the text—as if each one of them, upon reading and digesting a particular passage, leaned back into the chair in his study, closed his eyes and let his mind wander at will, thus feeding their intellect—and their conclusion—from different perspectives.

That is what we have here in the second part of v3: Not differing conclusions in which one is correct and the rest are incorrect, but different people perceiving the text from different directions, and thus offering different perspectives—*all of which are, in their own way, correct*. ➡

This results in a rich, fascinating bounty of insight which is a joy to read, but adds an extra challenge for the teacher in determining which portions to disseminate during a relatively brief class.

**For just one example**, the text compares “tablets of stone” to “tablets of hearts of flesh.” Some see these “fleshly hearts” as hearts that have been softened by the Spirit of God—hard stone vs. softened flesh—to receive and evidence the gospel of Christ. That is, flesh = good, receptive to God. On the other hand, some see these “hearts of flesh” as a reference to Paul’s typical use of “fleshly” (*sarkinos*) to describe the weak and sinful flesh of fallen man—and pointedly, the Corinthians.

*...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.*

This portion of v3 is just the introduction to what follows in vv4-18, but especially in vv4-11. This means that we cannot develop its fullness right now. This is a deep treatise that spans Moses and the Law, all the way to the End Times, the Eschaton—in which the Corinthians are already dwelling. ➡

Paul continues his letter imagery in the second part of v3, contrasting, first, the *means* by which the Corinthians' "letter of Christ" has been written and, second, the *medium* or *sphere* upon which it has been written. Historically, the first-century picture of writing with ink would be of (probably) hand-made ink comprised of soot and gum, applied by means of a reed pen or wooden stylus to papyrus. Ink represents not just the means by which the words are written, but the *content* of a letter as well. This is one reason why a hand-written letter is superior to one typed or printed: like a painting it can express not just *what*, but *how* and *why*—the expression, some of the emotion of the writer's thoughts are translated through his or her hand onto the page by means of the drawn characters.

The "ink" of the church's "letter of Christ" is "the Spirit of the living God." Only the NKJV differs with "*by* the Spirit of the living God," which removes Him from the ink and associates him to the pen or stylus, the impersonal implement. ➡ The comparisons in v3 are this:

- ink vs. Spirit;
- tablets of stone vs. tablets of hearts of flesh.

Beneath the surface but quite real is a third comparison:

- Christ vs. Yahweh.

*David Garland:* If Christ is the one who authors this letter and writes it on the hearts of believers through the Spirit, then Christ "is the new covenant counterpart of the Yahweh of Exodus 31 who wrote the law on the two stone tablets with His finger" (M. Fatehi).

As we discussed in the *Last Things* class, the Eschaton does not begin with the Rapture, the Tribulation, or final judgment, but began with the Incarnation of Christ in Bethlehem (see Session 1 of that study).

In a sense this is not wrong, but just inadequate; the words of this letter—the thoughts, the sentiments, the expression—come directly from the Spirit (note Paul's intentional insertion of "living")—meaning directly from God.  
(1 Corinthians 2:10-11)

**Read Exodus 31:18.**

Also in this verse we see the inter-connectedness of God's economy being enacted on earth. It is indeed *mystical*, with "the Spirit of the living God" writing something on "the hearts of flesh" of believers. But it is also *practical*, with the apostle "ministering" the gospel to them and shepherding them through the maturing process. Beneath the surface there are heavenly things going on in this, but it is all being implemented in a very human way.

"Ministered to" is the best translation. The word is from the root *diakoneo*, meaning to minister, to serve, to wait upon. A waiter may serve you, but a *deacon* serves you as a minister. ➡

The "living God" employs human beings to minister to other human beings. The gospel of Christ does not just fall out of the sky to land on unsuspecting strangers supernaturally. It is delivered, it is *ministered* by other human beings. Just as Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans.

#### **Read Romans 10:11-15.**

The gospel is to be "ministered," one human being to another. That is God's design for salvation. And we will see there is much more behind this as we proceed into v4 and beyond in our next session.

While I quarrel with the word "from" instead of "of Christ," I actually like how the NIVs phrase it with "you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry" That's not bad.