



## **Commendation**

2 Corinthians 3:1-3

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I'd like to draw your attention to Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. We have been going through this letter for the past few months, and this morning we will begin the third chapter. We'll be looking at the first three verses of 2 Corinthians, chapter 3. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Second Corinthians 3, beginning at verse 1:

*Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray that he would add his blessing to it. Dear Lord, we ask humbly that you would open up your Word to us. You have promised, O Lord, that your Word will not go forth and return unto you void, so we claim that promise. We ask, Lord, that you would help us to see your will in your Word and that you would show us the Lord Jesus Christ in all of his glory. We also ask, Lord, that you would show us our duty, a duty that includes faith in Jesus Christ, putting our trust in him for our salvation. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

What makes for a successful ministry? How do we know that a minister is true to the gospel? Or even perhaps more importantly, how do we know a minister *will* be true to the gospel before we even hear him? Paul takes up that topic today not because he wants to show how great he is but because he's being criticized by others.

This morning, I would like us to see three things from the apostle Paul. First, *reputation*. Second, *relationship*. Third, *rebirth*. Reputation, relationship, and rebirth. These are signs of a successful Christian ministry. They are signs that God is at work through one of his servants.

### **Reputation**

Let's begin, then, this morning by looking at Paul's discussion of *reputation* in verse 1. In verse 1 he says, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?" This passage is the start of Paul's extended defense of not only *his* ministry but of new covenant ministry in general.

In the first two chapters, we saw why this is necessary for Paul to take this up. There was a group in Corinth who thought themselves more important, more successful than Paul. Because of that, they criticized Paul. They criticized his motives, they criticized his actions, and they even criticized his integrity. The result was that Paul wrote perhaps the most heartfelt and comprehensive defense of the ministry in all of the New Testament.

We begin here with Paul's thought that reputation is important in the Christian ministry. Paul begins this chapter by asking two questions. Now, as we first read them, we might think that what Paul is saying is no one should need a recommendation or a commendation, but what we must do is read *this* passage in the context of the end of chapter 2. We can't read *this* chapter apart from chapter 2.

At the end of chapter 2, Paul was clear that there were some who claimed to teach God's Word but, instead, were deceiving others for their own advantage. In verse 17 of chapter 2, he says, "We are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word." This is important for us, because I think in our day and age, we often think as long as someone mentions the Bible, they must be a Christian. As long as someone talks about God or Jesus, they must be one of the good guys, as it were.

The truth is that in Paul's day, and in our day, there are those who will speak about God's Word, who will even talk about God's Word to others solely for self-gain. They are peddlers of God's Word. It's important that we distinguish between the true and the false. Now, understanding this context is also important for you as you study the Bible in general.

When you read the Bible, do not just pick random verses out of context. When you read, read in context. Read the Bible in its larger setting. If you take up, for example, one of the letters of Paul, read through the entire letter. Even the longer letters of Paul can be read through in a very short amount of time. In doing so, you will see the flow of Paul's argument, and you will see why he is bringing up certain things at certain times in the letter.

Now, Paul's two questions here that he asks in verse 1 are the kinds of questions that expect a "No" answer. We've seen this before. Paul has done this. I've mentioned that Greek has a way of highlighting a question to let you know whether it's an open-ended question or whether you're expected to answer "Yes" or whether you're expected to answer "No." We do this all the time in English, both with words and with the tone of our voice.

"You're not going to leave without finishing your work, are you?" You can tell from the tone of my voice and that "Are you?" at the end that the only answer you could possibly give is "No." There's no chance for a "Yes" there. Moms and dads do this all the time with their children. Perhaps you children are the most aware of what I'm talking about here. I've just made you Greek grammar experts.

Now, just because Paul asks these questions and expects a "No" answer (that is, he's saying, "Do you need me to bring letters of recommendation?" "Oh, of course, Paul; no, we don't") doesn't mean Paul thinks reputation is unimportant. It's something that is important to him. It's something that's especially important to a minister.

What he's doing is simply commenting on the fact that a minister like himself needs a reputation before others but that he has already established this reputation with the Corinthians. You could see this at the end of the first question in verse 1. He says, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?" The question here is "Do I need to do this over again? Do I need another recommendation? Don't you know me?" we could hear Paul saying, "Doesn't my reputation already go before me?"

Paul believes in recommendations. We know this because he has written letters of recommendation. He recommended Timothy to the Corinthians in the first letter to Corinth. He recommends Titus later in this letter to the church at Corinth. He recommended Phoebe to the church at Rome in *that* letter and Tychicus to the Ephesians in *that* letter. And, of course, the book of Philemon is one big letter of recommendation for Philemon.

All of this shows the importance in ministry of having a good reputation so you can be recommended to others. What does *your* reputation look like? How do others speak about *you*? Is it easy for people who do not know you to get a sense of who you truly are from the way people talk about you? Reputation is important. Not that we pander to others so we can get good recommendations but so that people know who we really are, so that we are known for who we are.

The problem with reputation is that it can be fabricated. It can be made up. Have you ever had the experience of dealing with someone, perhaps a repairman or a service company, who told you they were an expert in a certain area, and you found out very quickly that was nowhere near the truth? Perhaps they even had produced written testimonials to you about their service or about their product, but what you learned after the fact was it was all just made up.

There are employees at Amazon whose sole job is to go through the reviews of products and try to remove false reviews, reviews that companies leave on their own products to try to convince others that their products are good. You can falsify your reputation. Now, it won't last, because once it meets with reality, you're left disappointed. But on the front end, you can fabricate a reputation.

This is what Paul is trying to get the Corinthians to see. In his second question, he addresses the "some" who need letters of recommendation. It's clear from the context that the "some" Paul refers to in chapter 3 is the same group as the "so many" in chapter 2, verse 17: those who are peddlers of God's Word. Those who are peddling God's Word are the same people who are thinking these letters of recommendation are so important. It's the same group of people.

You have to understand this about the way Paul communicates with churches. Often, he will not give the names of the people he is criticizing or combating, and he doesn't do that because he's afraid to call someone out. There are other occasions where the situation is dire where Paul will name someone by their name in a letter, but the key here is Paul does not want to give them any more prominence than they already have. He doesn't want to make others know who these people are.

He doesn't want to lift them up. He doesn't want them talked about, so he uses phrases like *the some* or *so many* or *certain persons*. He will do this over and over again. Now, who are these "some" who are insisting on the letters of recommendation? They are Paul's critics. They came to Corinth with letters of recommendation, presumably from churches in Judea. The letters would have stated how great they were, how important they were; therefore, when they came to Corinth, they assumed positions of importance based on these letters of recommendation.

But we have to ask, "What had they done?" Did they establish churches? No. Had they built up the church in unity and in its mission? No, not from what we can see. Their main task, from what we can see, was to tear down

Paul. They criticized his motives. They blamed him for doing certain things. They even criticized him for *not* having letters of recommendation.

Now, why would Paul have needed a recommendation? Think about the accusation that's being laid at Paul's feet. Paul had come and founded the church. If he had not ministered among the Corinthians, the church wouldn't even exist. They wouldn't have known Jesus. They wouldn't have been changed. They wouldn't have forsaken sin for the Lord, yet for some here, that was not enough. It would have been better, in *their* minds, to have a letter like *they* had to go on with praise.

We see this even further in the second part of Paul's question. It's not just that they brought letters of recommendation *to* Corinth. They also wanted letters of recommendation *from* the church at Corinth. Why? Well, it appears so that they could go to other churches, also founded by Paul in his missionary endeavors, and they could go and criticize Paul there too. Again, what had they done? Nothing. They wanted to build their reputation on falsehoods or expanded descriptions of their own importance.

So Paul wisely advises the Corinthians, and you and me, to not fall for such fabrication. Recommendations can be important when you don't know someone, but when you know someone and know what they have done, what use are they? The Corinthians knew Paul. He had ministered among them. He had blessed them. He had established them. They knew him from his actions. Why would they prefer a letter to the actual knowledge of Paul?

There is an old saying: "The proof of the pudding is in the eating." I tell you that not just to make you hungry this morning, but if you think about it, the proof of whether pudding is good is found when you eat it. If pudding looks good on a plate, that's one thing, but pudding is not made for looking at; it's made for eating. That's how you find out if it is worthy of being called *good*. So it is with reputation. Reputation is important, but the way you establish and maintain a reputation is with actions, not with recommendations. a recommendation is merely a start to open a door.

Think about when you first started a new job. You may have gone to a job with a letter of recommendation describing your skill set, your education, how hard of a worker you were, and if you got the job and went into your office and sat there at your desk and never did any work and your boss came in and said, "What's going on here? Why aren't you working?" your response would not be to hand them the letter of recommendation and say, "It's okay. Don't worry. Here's my recommendation."

Your boss is going to say, "I don't care about that. You're not working. As a matter of fact, that letter is a falsehood. It says you're a hard worker. You're producing nothing at all." The way we maintain our reputation is through our actions. Let me ask you *this*: Are you living in such a way to maintain a good reputation both inside the church and outside?

## **Relationship**

That brings us to Paul's second point. What commends ministry are the *relationships* that are established in ministry. We see this in verse 2. Paul writes, "You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all." He had asked, as if expecting a "No" for an answer, "Do I need a letter of

recommendation?" Why is it that Paul *didn't* need one? Why is the answer to that question "No"? It's because he already had something better. He had relationships with the church.

Imagine this letter being read in the congregation. Paul is fighting for his reputation, and he asks, "Do I need recommendation letters?" His opponents think they have him now, because his choice is either to say, "No, I don't have one" or "I'll use my own self-recommendation." His opponents think he's about to step into a trap. But what Paul does here is he tells them, "I have something better than that. I have *you*. *You* are my letter of recommendation." Paul says, "You are my letter."

Think about what that means. Paul will not stake his reputation on a letter from a famous person. He could have brought a letter from the apostle Peter. He could have gotten a letter from the apostle James, but he didn't. He doesn't need such a letter. Paul stakes his claim to ministry on the existence of the church at Corinth. He's emphatic about this. He says, "You yourselves are my letter." If the Corinthians need evidence of Paul's effective and true ministry, all they need to do is look around at themselves.

Paul had something far better than secondhand praise. He had relationships with the people of the church, people who had once not known God but now know God, people who were once known for their sin but had left sin behind thanks to Paul's teaching and efforts. Christian relationships are real. They are crucial. It's not just that Paul was acquainted with the people at Corinth. They were known and loved by him.

He tells us this because he says they are a letter engraved on his heart. They are near and dear to him. They are close to the center of his being. The verb that is used here, to "write on my heart," is only used twice in the New Testament: here and in the gospel of Luke. It doesn't just mean to write something. It means to engrave it permanently so that it will never wash off, so that it will never smudge out.

I've told you that my son and his fiancée were married last weekend, and they did something with their rings that I have with my own ring. On the inside of my ring (and their rings) is engraved the date of my wedding ceremony so I can always remember my anniversary. I just pull it out, and I know. Nothing will take that away. I've taken this ring on and off my finger thousands of times. It's still there. It's engraved. It can never be washed away. That's what Paul is saying. They're not just written on his heart, not even with pencil, not even with pen ink, but they are engraved permanently.

I know this is true what Paul is talking about. We have lived here in Katy for 15 years. That is longer than we have lived anywhere in our family's life. We have known you. We have laughed with you. We have cried with you. You are written on our hearts. You see, the ministry is more than about producing results or numbers. It is about people. It is about building relationships. Is that true in *your* life? Are you building relationships with others? Because *that* is ministry.

Paul describes an additional aspect to the relationship he has with the Corinthians. They are written on his heart, but they are not hidden. We might think at first that that means they are hidden in Paul's chest. The heart is close. It's not something we show to others. It's not like putting something on your sleeve. But that's not what Paul

means here. That's not what he's describing. He's saying that these letters, the people, are "known and read by all," in verse 2.

They were a public display of Paul's ministry. Anyone could see the success of Paul's ministry. All they had to do was to look at all of the changed lives in Corinth. These were real people with real struggles, and by God's grace and the ministry of Paul, they were now different. Ministry does not go forward without the relationship of Christians to the world.

The Bible does not envision you practicing your religion in private. It teaches that a life changed by God is on display for the world to the glory of God. That's one reason public worship and a public display of ministry is so important to our faith. The most fundamental way you can be involved in ministry is to be seen in the world as being changed by Jesus. Even when you don't have opportunities to speak, your life speaks for you.

So, what are you doing today to establish relationships with others? Do you have friends and neighbors who are not Christians? Do you cultivate relationships with them? Are you known and read by them? Could they make an accurate assessment of Christianity from you and from your life? If not, then you need to begin to recognize that today. That is what you are called to in Christian ministry.

## **Rebirth**

This brings us, then, to Paul's third point: *rebirth*. Paul gives us an idea of what we are to display to the world, that we are to display that we have been reborn by the grace of God. Now, if reputation is important in the Christian ministry and if the great evidence of reputation is the relationship the minister has with his people and if Christians are letters on display before the world, then what should those letters say?

Paul says that these letters should say that they have been reborn, renewed, changed forever by the gospel. That is only possible by going beyond the minister, beyond the person. It is only possible by the work of Jesus. Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are a letter recommending his ministry, but that letter is not written by Paul. Do you see this? He says in verse 3, "And you show you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God."

The letter that is the people of Corinth is written by Jesus. Every minister worth his salt knows this. He knows that he can't bring about change. He can't save anyone. All he can do is introduce people to Jesus, because Jesus *can* save. Jesus *does* change people. Paul gives us a wonderful picture of this in verse 3. He says that these letters, the reborn people of God, are not written with ink. They are written with the Spirit of the living God. They are not written with tablets of stone; they are written on human hearts.

What this tells us is that true Christians are not simply papered over with morality. The Christian ministry is not designed or purposed to make people look better. It does not focus on the exterior. It focuses on the inside, on the heart. The change must be in the innermost being, because when the Bible talks about the heart, it includes more than just emotions. When we hear the word *heart*, we think of emotions, especially love, but in the Bible, the word *heart* is used in both the Old and the New Testament to describe the innermost being of a person. It is their way of thinking. It is their source of acting. It is who they are.

Now, it *is* true that an inner change will produce an exterior change as well, but we always must begin in the right place. We must begin with the heart. In Paul's day, the danger was going back to the Mosaic law. His opponents wanted to emphasize the external, the old covenant, but Paul had been transformed by Jesus. He knew this was a new day. He knew he could never go back to the covenant with Moses, not because Moses was wrong but because Moses had been overtaken by Christ. He had been fulfilled in Christ.

Do you see that in our day? In our day, it's especially easy to focus on external behavior when there are so many in our public society who are immoral in an obvious and public way. We think that if we could just get people to act better, that would be the solution, but what we have to focus on is the heart. You have to look to your *own* heart.

Have you been born again? Have you been renewed, changed by the Holy Spirit? Do you long for the glory of God? Does your love for Jesus inform everything you do? If not, then you need to start at the beginning. You need a work of grace. If you see this change in yourself, then you need to pursue Jesus with all of your strength, because he is what really matters.

Now, as we move toward a conclusion this morning, Paul has one last thing for us to consider briefly. He has made clear that the work of the ministry is the work of God. There is no ministry without Jesus. There is no ministry without the Spirit. But that does not mean people are uninvolved. After all, Paul gave his life for the ministry. Would he be telling us now that he has wasted his entire life? I don't think so. No. The work is Jesus' but the instrument that Jesus uses is his people.

We see this in the way Paul describes the letters. They are letters composed by Christ. They are from Christ, composed by Christ, with the Spirit of the living God, but they are delivered by us. Jesus uses ministers; he uses Christians to bring about his work in his people. Now, the word *delivered* here is instructive. It's not a Greek word that would normally be used to take one thing from one place to another place. It's actually a word that means, often, to minister. It's actually the same word we get our word *deacon* from, those who minister to others.

What Paul is saying here is the delivery mechanism Jesus has is the ministry. That's how his work is delivered. In a very real sense, Paul is saying that his ministry is commended by Christ. Christ has established Paul's ministry for Christ's purpose. What greater recommendation could Paul have than that, that he's serving the purpose of his Lord Jesus Christ? What we have here from Paul is a picture of the Christian ministry. It's a picture we should want to see in our own lives.

If we would be faithful to our Master, to Jesus, we need to be concerned to maintain our reputation both inside and outside the church, we need to build relationships with each other and with people in the world, and we need to remember that the goal of ministry is the transformational change that is only possible by the work of Jesus. Are you ready to embark on this mission? Because *that* is how the world will be changed. If you want true change, you have to follow Jesus.