

**SERIES: Power through Weakness**

**SERMON: Living Letters**

**SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 3:1-6**

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**DATE: October 23, 2005**

A couple of weeks ago I received a very nicely packaged public relations folder of information from a traveling evangelist. He sent me some information about himself, his education, his background, his seminars, and there is a nice picture of him, his wife, and four boys in a window of the folder. There is also a series of letters from various Evangelical Free Churches where he has spoken. Each letter was apparently solicited from the pastor and is designed to help convince me that this man could do some significant good for our church. That's smart, because the folder would probably go straight to the round file if there weren't some connection to the Free Church.

Back in the first century itinerant preachers often did the same thing—they produced letters from churches they had visited as their passports to acceptance among other churches. But the Apostle Paul didn't participate in this practice, and apparently his empty P.R. packet got him into trouble with his detractors in Corinth. They had already criticized him for all the suffering he endured, implying that if he were all that godly he sure wouldn't have to suffer so much. Then they had criticized him for changing his travel plans, even though he had changed them primarily out of sensitivity for them. Now they are criticizing him for not having a slough of reference letters.

Listen as Paul pours his heart out in 2 Cor. 3:1-6:

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

*Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

**Effective ministers see transformed lives as the proof of their ministry. (1-3)**

How do we measure a successful ministry? In a very real sense that is the question the whole book of 2 Corinthians addresses, and particularly the passage before us this morning. Paul's enemies are calling him a failure, and he is being forced to defend himself—not for the sake of his ego but for the sake of the Gospel he preached.

Having just claimed at the end of the last chapter that in contrast to the false teachers in Corinth he did not peddle the Word of God for profit but preached it sincerely, Paul stops and asks a couple of rhetorical questions which anticipate a negative answer: "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you

or from you?” Whenever he was forced to defend his ministry Paul was conscious of the fact that it might appear that his pride and ego were getting in the way. And, of course, that’s always a potential danger for us. But for Paul it wasn’t about him; it was about Christ, and if he had to defend himself in order to defend the Gospel, he was willing to take the risk.

Paul answers our question, “How do we measure a successful ministry?”, by making a negative point first:

**They don’t rely on external credentials, mere outward symbols of success.** (1) By the way, when I talk about effective ministers today I am talking about God’s perspective, not man’s. Sometimes we use the term “effective” in a purely pragmatic sense—if it works it’s effective. But I am thinking of “effective” in a spiritual sense. You could almost substitute the term “spiritually successful.”

It appears that Paul’s opponents in Corinth have been demanding to know, “Where are your credentials, Paul? What seminary did you graduate from? What degrees have you earned? How many best-selling books have you published?” As if these are the factors that determine whether a servant of God is valuable and qualified! Frankly there are many churches and pastors that seem to think they are! I know churches that wouldn’t think about hiring a senior pastor who wasn’t *Dr.* So-and-so. And I know pastors who never sign their name without adding, Ph.D., or D. Min. behind it. I read an article not too long ago entitled “*The D-Minization of the Ministry.*” Not “demon”, but “D. Min.,” the most common doctor’s degree obtained by pastors. We in the church seem to be as concerned with status as they are in academia or the corporate world.

I’m sure Paul could have compiled a resume, or curriculum vita, or P.R. folder that would have beat anything his detractors could produce. In fact, he did just that in Philippians 3, but then notice what he does with it—he trashes it!

*If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.*

*But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. (Phil. 3:4b-9)*

In effect Paul is saying, “Take all my ego symbols—all my degrees, my successes, my church-planter-of-the-year award, my possessions, my hopes, my dreams, any reference letters praising my seminars in Thessalonica or Philippi—and all together it’s a pile of garbage compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus.” In fact, he seems to be saying that these things actually

get in the way of knowing Jesus. Friends, God doesn't grade us the way we grade one another. Our external credentials are, in the long haul, meaningless.

Well, if letters of reference from previous ministries are not an accurate measure of success in ministry, what is? Paul now answers the question positively.

**Effective ministers appeal to a whole different kind of “letter of recommendation.”**

(2, 3) I love Paul's imagery in these verses. He doesn't deny that he has a letter of commendation; he simply denies that he carries it in his brief case. He can actually produce a far superior letter that proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ. In verse 2 he identifies that letter, “You yourselves are our letter.” The converts whom Paul won to Christ and then disciplined are the only reference letter he has any interest in.

By the way, in view of the way we gauge effectiveness in ministry today, I find it fascinating that in all his 12 or 13 epistles in the NT, Paul never gives us any attendance statistics from his churches; never tells us how many baptisms were performed in a given year; never reports on the number of new programs he started; and he never even tells us how the giving was doing compared to budget! For Paul *the only thing* that matters is the transformed lives of converts, as he is faithful to the call of God on his life. J. Philip Arthur asks,

*How does a pastor establish beyond doubt that he is a genuine servant of the gospel? His mother has a framed photograph on her mantel piece taken at [his installation] service. Lying somewhere in a drawer of his desk that hardly ever gets opened is the graduation certificate from seminary. But can he point instead, as Paul could, to a number of people who have been altered for the better because of his ministry?<sup>i</sup>*

And what about the rest of us? You know, we are all ministers; we may not be professionals but we are all called to ministry. Do we have any living letters of commendation? Our children? Hopefully! Any colleagues at work? Any neighbors? Any fellow-believers whom we have disciplined and encouraged?

Now in describing his living letter of reference, Paul answers a number of questions that might come to our minds.

**Where is this letter written?** He says it is “written on our hearts.” These young believers are not just notches on Paul's Bible; they are individuals he loves and prays for. He has literally poured his life into them, and he carries their burdens and hopes and dreams in his heart everywhere he goes. I think one of the indications of whether we have any living letters in our hearts is our prayer life. Samuel said of the people God assigned to him, “God forbid that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right” (1 Samuel 12:23). For whom do we pray daily (or even weekly), that God will transform them into the image of His Son?

**Who reads it?** Paul says this letter is “known and read by everybody.” Most reference

letters are private and are read only by a select few who happen to be in on the process of deciding whether someone is going to be invited to speak or not, or in the case of a search committee, to decide whether they will be hired or not. The reference letter Paul talks about is public. Anyone who opens his eyes can see it and read it. They can see that so-and-so's life has been transformed and he is no longer the person they knew him to be previously.

Don't forget that some of the people in the Corinthians church had rap sheets a mile long. Here's what Paul says about them in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11:

*Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

Some of the pillars of the Corinthian church were former addicts, having struggled with drugs and alcohol for years. Some were converted out of a gay lifestyle. Some had been executives at Enron. But their lives had been changed in a profound way. If anyone required proof that Paul was an able and effective minister of the Gospel, all he had to do was look around at this congregation. Many faces told amazing stories of radical transformation, wasted lives made productive, hopeless lives that now had great potential. We have some of those here at First Free, too, of course, but we aren't nearly as comfortable admitting it as they apparently were at Corinth. There's a downside to that, and it is that God doesn't get the glory He deserves (for transforming lives). Also people don't get to see the "before" and "after" pictures that convince them that they too can experience transformation. Living letters should be known and read by everybody.

**Who writes it and sends this letter?** Verse 3: "You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry." I see a dual authorship being alluded to here. Certainly Jesus Christ is the ultimate author and sender of the letter of changed lives. If it weren't for His sacrifice on the cross and the righteousness that He imputes and imparts to those who put their faith in Him, there would be no transformation. But we must not overlook the fact that He uses gifted servants as His tools of transformation. Rarely, if ever, does anyone pass from death into life without a spiritual midwife or obstetrician being involved. I think that is what Paul is saying in Romans 10 when he asks a series of questions:

*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?*

Theoretically, of course, God could send an angel to share the Gospel, or raise up a stone to speak, but He doesn't. He uses people, and Paul was profoundly grateful that God chose him to be one of those messengers. He is not one to exhibit the kind of false humility that says, "It's all of God; I had nothing to do with it." He didn't produce the harvest, but he sure planted the seed!

He didn't write the letter by himself, but he sure cooperated in the writing of it.

**What is it written with?** Look at the middle of verse 3: "written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God." Ink fades, the Spirit's work lasts. You know, the novel that constitutes the life of the ordinary unbeliever is written largely with ink. Ink speaks of human influence, societal pressures, cultural distinctives. The education he receives in grade school, high school, and college is all written with ink. His career writes a chapter of his life with ink. When he goes to a psychologist or a medical doctor his file is written with ink. And sadly, he may even go to church and discover that his pastor writes only with ink. As I was traveling this week my wife and I heard a radio preacher who gave a very eloquent sermon that never mentioned Christ or the Bible—it was a wonderful story with a fine moral application, but it was just ink.

However, when a person is born again by faith in Jesus Christ, God begins to write chapters in his novel, not with ink but with His Holy Spirit, and that novel comes to life. The fruit of the Spirit becomes evident—love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These letters don't fade with time; in fact, the opposite happens—the writing becomes more distinct and Christ-like as time goes on.

Let me just stop here and ask a question: Is there evidence of anything but ink in the writing of your life's novel? Are there chapters in your novel that have no human explanation, that reveal the fingerprints of God and demonstrate the work of the Holy Spirit?

**What is it written on?** The answer: not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts. Paul may be thinking here of the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written, because he refers to them in the next few verses, but I think the ultimate point here comes from Ezekiel 36:25-27, where the prophet is predicting the return of God's people from captivity and a major spiritual renewal:

*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*

The problem with God's people in the OT was largely one of hardness of heart. They knew what God desired and what He required, but their hearts were often like stone, and stone is not easy to write on, you know. It takes a hammer and chisel, and a lot of effort. How much easier it would be if the people's hearts were soft and pliable! The prophet predicts that a time would come when God would give His people just that—a tender heart.

When would that happen? Well, Ezekiel says that cleansing or forgiveness has to come first (which historically was offered through the sacrifice of Christ); then God would put His Holy Spirit within them (which historically happened on the Day of Pentecost). Then, and only then, would there be the potential for lives of heart-felt obedience.

You see, in the OT the Holy Spirit came upon certain people for special purposes, but only in the NT does the Holy Spirit indwell every believer and provide the power for holy living. In other words, as people are saved by faith in Christ and subsequently indwelt by the Holy Spirit, they receive a new heart upon which the Spirit can write a living letter of transformation.

What an amazing picture Paul has drawn for us here to describe the living letters of commendation that validate true effectiveness in ministry! Scott Hafemann has written a powerful application of this passage to the church today:

*Paul's understanding of the nature of Christian ministry strikes a piercing blow against all attempts, whether in Paul's day or our own, to fashion ministries and messages around techniques and technology. As children of the entertainment age, our culturally conditioned reflex is to make creating right environments for hearing the gospel our priority, instead of relying first and foremost on the power of the Spirit to call people to repentance. Our tendency is to concentrate on "working the angles" instead of relying on Christ to work. Rather than viewing the pastor as a mediator of the Spirit in conjunction with the proclamation of the Word, the minister becomes a "professional" whose job it is to manage the corporate life of the congregation and oversee the creation of meaningful worship "events."*<sup>ii</sup>

Now Paul recognizes that what he has claimed here in terms of the transformed lives of his converts might seem to be prideful, so he quickly moves to correct that impression.

**Effective ministers spurn self-promotion and self-confidence in favor of God-confidence.**  
(4-6a)

Verse 4: "Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God." He is not bragging; he is not expressing self-confidence; rather it is God-confidence, Christ-confidence. Then he speaks even more bluntly: "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim *anything* for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent . . ." Paul acknowledges that his effectiveness at Corinth had not been the result of his natural gifts. God, of course, uses our natural gifts and talents, but without His power and enabling, the very best of natural gifts produce only spiritual chaff. Clearly there had been a force at work in that city which made promiscuous people faithful; sexual perverts gave up their depravity; drunks became sober; financial sharks became honest and trustworthy. The only explanation is that God was at work.

Before we move on, let me ask all of us a question: Do we really realize and accept the truth that Paul is driving home here—that God is the source and supply of everything good in our lives? In 1 Cor. 4:7 Paul asks, "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" It's all of God. He is the originator, the owner, the equipper, the motivator, the producer; we are but clay in His hands.

Finally this morning, I want to just introduce an idea that we will examine in detail next Lord's

day:

**Effective ministers focus on the New Covenant message. (6)**

Verse 6: “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” What is Paul talking about when he speaks of “ministers of a new covenant?” Well, the clear inference is that there must have been an old covenant. The Old Covenant was the agreement God made with the children of Israel in Moses’ day, encapsulated in the Ten Commandments but including all the civil, ceremonial, and dietary laws in the OT. It was a Covenant that promised blessing for obedience and judgment for disobedience. There wasn’t anything intrinsically wrong with the Old Covenant—in fact, its laws were good and perfect; the fault was with the people and the fact that most of them, at least, failed to internalize it.

The New Covenant that Paul speaks of is mentioned only once in the OT where it is predicted by the OT prophet Jeremiah. Look at 31:31-33:

*"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.*

*It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt [clearly referring to the Mosaic Law], because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.*

*"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."*

This New Covenant was ratified and inaugurated by the death of Christ. Do you recall the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, “This is the new covenant in my blood”? When Jesus died He made possible a whole new kind of relationship between God and His people. It is different, Paul says, in two important ways:

**1. The Old Covenant is “of the letter”; the New is “of the Spirit”.** Under the Old Covenant, Israel as a whole received the Law, but only a few received the Spirit, and only temporarily. And the Law without the Spirit to energize and motivate the reader is merely a lifeless “letter.” But when Jesus sealed the New Covenant with His blood He promised that He would send the Holy Spirit to live permanently in the believer’s life. God’s law would be internalized, and the power to obey it would come from within. Secondly, Paul says . . .

**2. The letter kills; the Spirit gives life.** There are few statements in the Bible that have been subject to more misinterpretation than this one. The church of the Middle Ages used it to justify allegorical interpretations of the Scripture. They held that “letter” means “literal” while “Spirit” refers to “allegorical.” This allowed a text to mean just about whatever the church

wanted it to mean. Those who promote situation ethics love to quote this verse, “the letter kills; the Spirit gives life,” because they contend it allows them to ignore specific commandments so long as they are seeking to live in the spirit of love, which means “whatever you want to do.” And there are certain charismatics in our own day who use it to say that the Bible is mere ink on paper, lifeless and sterile. Why not bypass all that and deal directly with the Holy Spirit? Words of faith and knowledge from the Spirit are superior.<sup>iii</sup>

But all of these interpretations are bogus. The contrast Paul is setting up between letter and Spirit is really a contrast between Law and Gospel, two periods of redemptive history. The Law is said to “kill” because of its demand for absolute obedience and its corresponding condemnation of all those who failed to keep it perfectly. All is not lost, however, for the law forces the sinner to despair under its demands, thereby driving some to the life-giving promise of forgiveness and power found in the Gospel. As Paul states in Galatians 3:24, “the Law was put in charge of us to lead us to Christ.” The “letter” kills in order that the “Spirit” might make us alive.

Effective ministers focus on the New Covenant message. That is, they don’t tell people they can earn God’s favor by keeping laws or performing deeds of righteousness. Rather they tell them that the only way to get right with God is by trusting in the death of Jesus Christ and accepting His righteousness in place of one’s own self-righteousness.

**Conclusion:** I wish to return where we started today. What does your P.R. portfolio look like? If asked to justify your time on earth at the Judgment Seat of Christ, what kind of letter are you going to have to offer Him? Will you have more than a picture of your family, a personal resume, a few letters from friends verifying that you’re a nice person, a certificate of baptism, a plaque to signify that you learned all your verses in AWANA, a letter of thanks from the Children’s Pastor for teaching a S.S. class? Do you have any living letters to present to the Savior? May God help us to pour our energies and gifts into people so they can be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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i. J. Philip Arthur, *Strength in Weakness*, 69.

ii. Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians, The NIV Application Commentary*, 120.

iii. Arthur, 72.