

Living Epistles

Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.”

II Corinthians 3:2-3

Introduction:

1. Last Lord's Day we considered the call to holiness and its promises and threat from II Corinthians 7:1.
2. If we cleanse ourselves and perfect holiness, then we will conform our lives to Christ's glorious image.

I. The CONTEXT (3:1-18)

- A. The Epistle (1-3). Having described his constant triumph (2:14-16) and exceptional integrity (2:17) in preaching the gospel, Paul used three rhetorical questions to correct any false ideas he was foolishly commending himself. The Corinthian saints themselves proved his ministry from God, both in his heart and before all witnesses. And this obvious certification had been first written by the Spirit in their hearts and then brought to manifestation by his ministry. They were all the evidence he needed.
 1. Letters of commendation were used among the churches (Act 18:27; I Cor 16:3).
 2. Conversion of great sinners to saints declares much (I Cor 9:1-2; I Thes 1:8-10).
- B. The Ministry (4-6). Though personally confident of his ministry from the Lord, Paul still gives all the credit to God's sufficient supply for any ability or fruit in his ministry. And then he introduces the superiority of the new testament through its life-giving nature, of which God had made him a minister, through clear revelation.
 1. Paul labored more abundantly than others, but only by God's grace (I Co 15:10).
 2. Jesus Christ gave Paul by direct revelation the gospel he preached (Gal 1:10-24).
 3. Paul knew that abiding in Jesus Christ was the basis for any success (John 15:5).
- C. The Glory (7-11). Having introduced the superiority of the new testament, Paul briefly compared the glory of the two covenants. The new testament is better as life is better than death, righteousness than condemnation, and that which endures is better than that which is temporary and passes away. Relatively, the old testament had no glory.
 1. The purpose of the law was to show the great sinfulness of sin (Romans 7:7-13).
 2. The law's design was only to point to its superior replacement (Gal 3:21-25).
 3. Paul later make this comparison again (Heb 2:1-4; 9:1-14; 10:26-31; 12:18-29).
- D. The Clarity (12-16). New testament ministers speak plainly, in contrast to the veiled and figurative message of the old testament, for they have such a superior message. And further, the Jews had been justly blinded for their stubborn rebellion, and did not know their own scriptures, though repentance could bring sight even to them.
 1. Not all Jews were blinded, for Paul himself was a believing Jew (Rom 11:1-2).
 2. And for those who would repent, God was able to graft them in (Rom 11:23-24).
 3. The New Testament is clear truth, not vague figures (John 4:23; Heb 9:8-14).
- E. The Transformation (17-18). Jesus Christ is the Lord and Spirit of liberty, as opposed to the condemnation and obscure revelation from Moses. And this testament and its ministry included a progressive conforming to Christ's glorious image, by the Spirit.
 1. The path of the just is a progressive one of light and strength (Pro 4:18; Ps 84:7).
 2. Saints are to desire the milk of the word to grow thereby (I Pet 2:2; II Pet 3:18).

II. The LESSON (3:2-3)

- A. The work of the Spirit of God in regeneration preparatory to the work of the ministry in conversion should combine to result in living epistles – lives that give documentary certification of our official status and personal character as children of God.
- B. The lives of saints should reflect the image of their Creator and Saviour – Jesus Christ. They should be an epistle or letter to the world showing the grace of God in their lives.
 - 1. Do we think, speak, and act as Jesus Christ, the perfect standard of godliness?
 - 2. The world influences Christians into fads such as WWJD, but we know better.
 - a. They do not know Jesus, nor how He would think, speak, or act.
 - b. They are following the crowd into a form of godliness without authority.
 - c. Though it is not a sin to wear such a bracelet, it is not nearly enough.
 - 3. Paul taught the saints to follow him, as he followed Jesus Christ (I Cor 11:1).
 - 4. All men should know we are disciples of Jesus Christ by our love (John 13:15).
 - 5. He suffered unjust treatment to give us an example of doing it (I Peter 2:18-21).
 - 6. The merciful and benevolent treatment of enemies is like Christ (Matt 5:43-48).
 - 7. Paul exhorted saints to walk as he and other examples walked (Phil 3:17-19).
 - 8. Paul wanted them to copy things learned, received, heard, and seen (Phil 4:9).
 - 9. When Jesus washed the disciples' feet, he told them to copy Him (John 13:15).
 - 10. We are to walk in love, even as Christ has walked in love toward us (Eph 5:2).
 - 11. We are to have the same mind as our Lord – willing humility to serve (Phil 2:5).
 - 12. If a person claims to abide in Jesus Christ, he should walk like Him (I John 2:6).
 - 13. As He laid down His life for us, we should lay down ours for Him (I John 3:16).
 - 14. Paul travailed like in the birth process to form Christ in the Galatians (Gal 4:19).
 - 15. We put on the Lord Jesus Christ by copying His spirit and actions (Rom 13:14).
 - 16. Jesus calls us to take His yoke upon us and learn of Him (Matthew 11:28-30).

III. The APPLICATION (3:18)

- A. The freedom and liberty of free salvation and clear understanding of the new testament is for our gradual perfection by the Holy Spirit into the glorious image of His dear Son.
- B. The lives of saints should show more and more of Jesus Christ as they grow in glory.
 - 1. This text does not have anything at all to do with national or political freedom.
 - 2. We have a new man created in the image of Jesus Christ (Col 3:10; Eph 4:24).
 - 3. He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it to the end (Phil 1:6).
 - 4. The goal is a perfect man, even by the Spirit of the Lord (Col 1:28-29; Ep 4:12).
 - 5. If He has made us partakers of the divine nature and given us all things that pertain to life and godliness, what hinders our diligent addition (II Peter 1:1-5).
 - 6. We must grow in grace, for the spiritual man has growth potential (II Pet 3:18).

Conclusion:

- 1. Are you a living epistle of Jesus Christ, Who has wrought a great and glorious work of grace in you?
- 2. Or are you a book that can be read of all men that does not show any change from other natural men?
- 3. Is this church a collection of epistles of our Lord Jesus Christ, with all members showing His salvation?