

"Paul Defends His Message"**2 Corinthians 3:1-5**

Introduction: Tonight in our study of 2 Corinthians we have made our way to chapter 3. Now in order to grasp the thought of the Apostle Paul in these verses we need to keep in mind what was happening at the church at Corinth. The critics who were against Paul had been permitted to infiltrate the church at Corinth. They attacked his character in an attempt to discredit his letters which were the Word of God. The critics claimed his suffering was the result of sin within his life. The critics pointed to his changed plans and they accused him of saying one thing and then doing another. Basically they accused him of being a liar. All the attacks were really against his apostleship. The critics did not believe Paul was a true apostle. If you remember one of the requirements of being an apostle was to have seen Jesus Christ after His resurrection. Paul did not step on the scene until after the ascension of Jesus Christ and therefore that caused many to doubt. They apparently question or even denied his Damascus Road experience. Therefore Paul had to defend his apostleship because of the lies of the critics.

Now all these attacks and these lies had influenced some of the believers at Corinth and they too were beginning to question Paul's authority and his apostleship. In chapters 1-2 Paul basically defended his MINISTRY and in so doing he ended that defence with 2 Corinthians 2:17.

Notice 2 Corinthians 2:17

Paul stated here that he and those with him were not like many others which "corrupted" which means "peddled by trickery" the Word of God. There were many false teachers in Paul's day who would use the Word of God for personal profit and personal gain. Let me show you what Peter wrote concerning the false teachers.

2 Peter 2:1-3, 12-18

But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.

² *And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of.*

³ *And **through covetousness** shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not.*

¹² *But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall utterly perish in their own corruption;*

¹³ *And shall receive the reward of unrighteousness, as they that count it pleasure to riot in the day time. Spots they are and blemishes, sporting themselves with their own deceivings while they feast with you;*

¹⁴ *Having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls: an heart they have exercised with covetous practices; cursed children:*

¹⁵ *Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness;*

¹⁶ *But was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbade the madness of the prophet.*

¹⁷ *These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever.*

¹⁸ *For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh,*

The critics of the apostle Paul were placing them in the same class with these people. But Paul made it clear he and those with him were not as these false teachers. The false teachers were controlled by the desires of the flesh while Paul was controlled by the Spirit. His message was from God and He spoke IN CHRIST.

Now when those at Corinth read 2 Corinthians 2:17 they may have thought Paul was going down the path of self-commendation again for he had defended his ministry on several accounts previously but Paul had something else as proof of his ministry and apostleship.

I. The Living Evidence

Notice 2 Corinthians 3:1a

Paul asks 2 questions in this verse. He uses the word "again" which tells us he had previously spelled out his credentials to prove his apostleship. This may have been a reference to the first visit when the church was started or it may have been during the visit where he confronted them on their sin. But either way some of the Corinthians may have thought he was about to speak of his credentials AGAIN based upon what he had said in 2:17.

Notice 2 Corinthians 3:1b

Here is the second question which Paul asked. There was sarcasm in the question. Here was the man whom God used to start the church at Corinth, the man who had poured his heart

into sharing the Gospel so as to see the people at Corinth saved and now the church was hinting that they might demand letters of commendation to prove his apostleship. Possibly they wanted a letter from Peter, James or John, people they considered to be "real" apostles.

Application:

Let me just stop here for a moment and remind you and me of something very important. This to me is amazing when I look at how they questioned Paul. This was all the result of false teachers spreading their lies. This is why it is so important to be careful what we listen to. There is not one of us who does not have the potential of being deceived by false teachers and buying into something that is completely wrong. It happened to some of the Corinthians after they had heard the message of the Gospel from the apostle Paul. Let me just say that if someone tells a lie long enough and loud enough some people will eventually believe it.

Notice 2 Corinthians 3:2

This verse contains much spiritual Truth for us to consider. Let me break it down so that we can better understand what Paul is saying.

"Ye are our epistle written in our hearts..."

Paul tells the believers at Corinth that they were the only epistle that was needed to show proof of his sincerity and apostleship. They were the evidence. When Paul had first made his way into Corinth these people were involved in idolatry and worshipped many false gods. They were involved in immorality beyond what we can imagine. But now their lives had been changed for that is what true salvation does. Let me show you what Paul had recorded in 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 9:1-2

Am I am not an apostle? am I not free? have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? are not ye my work in the Lord?

² If I be not an apostle unto others, yet doubtless I am to you: for the seal of mine apostleship are ye in the Lord.

Now let me get you back to the verse again.

"Ye are our epistle written in our hearts..."

Paul stated that they were his epistle/letter of commendation and it was written on HIS HEART. This was a statement about Paul's love for these people. Let me show you a verse we will study at a later date.

2 Corinthians 7:2-3

² *Receive us; we have wronged no man, we have corrupted no man, we have defrauded no man.*

³ *I speak not this to condemn you: for I have said before, that ye are in our hearts to die and live with you.*

Paul told them that they were in his heart and it was his desire to DIE and LIVE with them. This is the opposite of what is usually said. It is normally said that we desire to LIVE and DIE with someone. But it was the opposite with Paul. He was stating that he loved them so much that he was willing to die to his personal desires and his personal rights so as to live with them and lead them deeper into their relationship with Christ.

Back to the main thought again; Paul needed no written proof his apostleship for the Corinthians were the proof. Let us notice the second part of the verse.

² *Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men:*

Paul did not just "imagine" that the Corinthians had been changed by the Gospel. The change in their lives was visible to all who watched them. They were known and read by all men.

Application:

This is a great reminder to us that as we live out our Christian lives in Christ that we are a "letter" that is read by all who see us. We are here on this earth to manifest Jesus Christ to all whom we meet. The resurrection power of Jesus Christ has changed our lives and we are to live in a way that others see Christ in us.

Notice the poem by Annie Johnson Flint.

"Hands and Feet for Him"

We are the only Bible

The careless world will read,

We are the sinners Gospel,

We are the scoffer's creed;

We are our Lord's last message,

Written in deed and word;

What if the type be crooked?

What if the print be blurred?

Our lives should be lived in a way that others see the change within us. Let me take you into the Old Testament and show you how one man made a huge difference in the midst of a corrupt society.

Jonah 3:1-5

And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying,

² *Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.*

³ *So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey.*

⁴ *And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*

⁵ *So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.*

Jonah was one man and through his simple message recorded in Jonah 3:4 the entire city believed God and repented. How did this man have such an impact? He had spent 3 days in the belly of the fish. The gastric juices of that fish would have bleached his skin the color of death. When he walked into Nineveh it was literally "written all over him" that God will punish sin. Jonah was a living epistle. But it was not just the message of judgment which they saw. They were also able to see the epistle which read "God will pardon sinners". As he walked in the power of the resurrection and the people of the city read the 2 messages on him it was then that they believed God and they repented.

We too walk in the power of the resurrection and therefore we have the potential to make a difference in the places where God has placed us.

Notice 2 Corinthians 3:3

Not only were these believers at Corinth the epistles of Paul but they even above that the epistles of Jesus Christ. He was the Author of the epistles for it was because of Him they

were saved and changed. Now they were not epistles written with ink but they were epistles written with the Holy Spirit and the Spirit did not write on Tables of stone as was done in the Old Testament with the Law which was given to Moses, but the Spirit of God wrote upon their hearts. The Spirit of God was the pen and the Corinthians were the paper and Jesus was the Author.

We must slow down here and realize that the very Truth can be said about us. The Holy Spirit is the pen, we are the paper and Jesus Christ is the Author. Now listen to what I am about to say, It is the desire of our Lord that the unsaved world around us reads His story when they look at our lives. Let me show you what Paul wrote concerning the Romans and the Thessalonians.

Romans 1:8

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.

1 Thessalonians 1:8

⁸ For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.

Let me get back to you and I being epistles. What should people read in our epistle? The list could go on and on but I will give you a few things which the world should see in our epistle. Love, joy, peace, contentment, patience, hope, forgiveness, long suffering and it goes on and on.

Let us notice 2 more verses.

Notice 2 Corinthians 3:4

Paul takes no glory for what has happened in their lives for he makes it clear that he is trusting in the resurrected power of Jesus Christ to do the work within their hearts.

Notice 2 Corinthians 3:5

Here he states that his sufficiency is completely of God. The word "sufficiency" is referring to his ability. Paul was not trusting in his ability reach the lost. He was trusting in God for He knew that if God's power was excluded there would be no [possible way to reach the lost and see their lives change.

Conclusion:

Let us remember that we are called to be living epistles and as we go out into the world we must be sure we are living in a way that the power of God is not hindered in our lives.

Let me leave you with 2 verses.

1 Corinthians 2:4-5

⁴ *And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power:*

⁵ *That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.*