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2 CORINTHIANS 3:1-3

2 Corinthians Series

[PRAYER] Lord, the birth of Jesus Christ changed so much. It marks our calendars. It changed history. We look at so many places, just driving down the road we see so many churches because you've so influenced our world with Jesus Christ. Of course we can look into our own hearts and see the changes you've made in our own lives and those changes that are yet to be made and need to be made. So Lord, we come before you as humble people and asking for your grace today. We ask that that grace would ooze in and around the challenges we experience, the hurts that we have in our hearts, the brokenness that we have because of challenges that have overwhelmed us at points. Sometimes no fault of ours, but just because of bad things in our world. We need that grace and we need that love. We thank you for Christmastime and what it represents, the gift of Jesus Christ to us. So now, Lord, bless us as we open your word and look at it. We ask that you would teach us from it. In Jesus' name, amen.

It's really important to have an identity in life. We help young people develop a strong identity because when you have a strong identity then it kind of gives you a mission of where you're going. It gives you purpose in life. The challenge in developing an identity is it's always best to have an identity that's focused on how God created us. He built us so we would have an identity in Christ.

You can have an identity to be a great soccer player or go to a great college someday, or you can have a great identity that may be because you're intellectual or you're wealthy or you're good looking. You can have identity that's based on all kinds of things. Some people base their identity on things like "I like people to like me." The problem with all those kind of identity issues is that they change. Because they change it makes their identity unstable. It's a problem.

So God has designed us so that we can have an identity in Jesus Christ. We have that identity, then we have this rock that we stand on. It provides for us things like joy, even in the midst of troubled circumstances. Peace, even in the midst of upsetting times. Love, even though some people are hard to love. We can have those things because our rock is that identity. In Jesus Christ we have that special identity.

That's what our passage is about today. As we go into 2 Corinthians 3 we're going to see more about this identity, what it looks like and how we can apply it to our lives, but before we do, I want to ask you to stand and I want to read the passage for today so that you can understand where we're going. Let's stand in honor of God's word as I read this passage to you from 2 Corinthians 3:1-3.

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 everyone. 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.

If we were to summarize this passage in one sentence it would be something like this: God has chosen us to be letters of a message to a world that needs to hear this special message, a message about God. We're going to learn more about that today and we're going to take that passage part.

In order to understand this passage, I'd like us to step back out of the passage and look at the historical context. Because the historical context and what's going on in the actual story behind the words often gives us greater insight into the passage and then give us greater ways that we can apply it.

Part of what Paul is trying to do in this letter is defend himself before the Corinthians. You'll see that throughout the letter. He's defending himself because there are some people, we don't know if they're Christians or non-Christians, leaders or non-leaders, but someone is attacking his character and saying that he's not being sincere, that maybe he's just trying to get money from these people. Or maybe he's just trying to build himself up or maybe he's representing something that's false.

So let's go to the verse right before this. This is the last verse of 2 Corinthians 2 and it reads this way. It says – *Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.* You can kind of feel the defensiveness, can't you, in his words. He's not saying that missionaries should not be financed. He's not saying he shouldn't take an offering. We know that because later in this exact epistle he's going to ask them to participate in an offering that he's going to take. When he writes to Timothy he writes about being ministers being paid. So he's not talking about them not being paid. He's talking about people who maybe are just using the gospel as a product in order to offer it for a profit of some kind. That's dangerous. It's not just dangerous in ministry. It's dangerous for anyone to get sucked into using somehow the gospel for money.

In fact I just want to suggest (and I'm going to take a little tangent here for a moment) that there are three primary problems or temptations that all of us experience. We see that in ministry leaders too. They experience these. But any of us could experience these challenges and we need to have a plan for them.

One is anger. Because if we don't have a plan for anger it's going to turn into bitterness. We must have a plan in our lives for dealing with bitterness or anger. The second one is to have a plan for dealing with money. Otherwise we'll become materialistic and we're focused on money more than is good. And the third one has to do with sex. Doing something in that area can lead to immorality.

Now anger, money, and sex are not bad. They are just temptations that can lead us into a bad place. I would just encourage you to have a plan for each one of those areas in your life. Those

are the big three. I would suggest there are others, but these are the primary ones that can drag us down.

I would suggest you think about them because maybe you're not experiencing a problem in one of those right now, but you need to develop a plan so when you are tempted in that area you have a plan. Or maybe you are challenged in one of these areas right now and you know you need to develop a plan because you know it can really damage who you are and what's going on in your life.

Well having said that, we see that Paul is defending himself. He's saying we're not like these people. In fact he uses the word *sincerity* there. We're sincere. But you know in that culture, in that time, the Corinthians or someone in the church at Corinth or some person was saying, "Does Paul have any letters of recommendation? Who can vouch for him?" That's the question that's being asked.

So as we go into our passage today in 2 Corinthians 3, we see that Paul is saying – *Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?* And then he launches into this idea by saying – *You yourselves are our letter.* I don't need a letter of recommendation. You are the letter yourself.

So from that idea, I want to look at five questions right from these words, from this passage that we're looking at. Five questions I'd like to ask about this letter. Number one – who is the letter? That's going to be us. We're the letter. Secondly, who's the letter from? It's from Christ. Third, who wrote the letter? It's the Holy Spirit. What is it written on? It's the paper it's written on; it's written on the heart. And who are the recipients of the letter? It's everyone.

Now I'm going to take you back through those five questions now. We're going to get them right out of the text. So I didn't just develop those questions somewhere else. I developed those questions right out of the Bible. I think that's the best way for us to learn is to allow the Bible to speak. So I want to look at each one of those questions and try to understand what God is saying to us about us being the letter that He wants to use as this message to the world.

So the first question is, who is the letter? It says – *You yourselves are our letter.* So just look in the mirror. God has chosen people in order to spread the message, the word out to others. That's great that God has done that. We are the recipients of this gift of ministry that we can turn around and other people can look at our lives and see Jesus. That's the goal.

Every once in a while I get a piece of mail from the postal service that's in a plastic bag because it's been mangled by the equipment or something. I don't know if you ever get those. But it somehow got mangled by all the equipment and chopped up, so I get a plastic bag and in there is like the address or something. I'm going, "Where's the rest of the mail. Where's the rest of the piece?" Of course it's not in there. All I get is the piece that's left, which is like the address or some chopped up piece of mail. I think sometimes that's how we feel as letters. Because we're chopped up in the brokenness of life. We go through all these challenges that we have. So we don't feel like a piece of mail. We just feel like we're chopped up in this whole process. So we're stuck in this plastic bag and we're being delivered, but we don't have the message.

We are the letters. *You yourselves are the letter*. But I want you to see the letter doesn't come from us. Its value isn't determined by us ourselves. We have to see who the letter is from.

So let's go to the second question. Notice in verse 3 it says the *letter is from Christ*. That's what makes it valuable. In fact I'm starting to feel a little more valuable already. Because the letter is from Christ. So it's not about me. It's about Jesus being reflected through me. I'm just the vehicle, but God is using me as this letter for other people to see. I'm starting to feel a little more valuable already.

I enjoyed reading the story this week of a bargain hunter. We don't even know his name. But he went to a flea market and he bought this painting for four dollars because he wanted the frame. That's all he wanted. He wanted the frame that looked good. He was going to take the canvas off. So when he got home, he started cutting the canvas off and the frame kind of fell apart, so it was a waste of four dollars. But inside he saw this folded up piece of paper. So he pulled that out and he opened it up to find that it was one of the original printings of the *Declaration of Independence*. This is a true story. The guy pays four dollars and he finds one of the original printings. There's about two hundred printed in that first printing of the *Declaration of Independence*. So in the end, that document that he found sold for 2.4 million dollars.

What a find at a flea market. Can you imagine? It makes you want to go to garage sales, doesn't it? You know what that does for me? It just reminds me that I'm really valuable. Not because of the frame that I have, but because of who Christ is in me. It's my identity that God has given me because of who He is. That's really powerful.

I like the story of the pastor who someone in his church was telling him, "I cleaned out his attic and threw away this German Bible that had Gutenstien or something written on it."

He says, "You don't mean Gutenberg, do you?"

"Yeah, yeah. It was Gutenberg."

"You found a Gutenberg Bible in German? That was probably worth a lot of money."

The guy says, "Nah, it couldn't have been worth anything because it was all scribbled on inside by a man named Martin Luther."

I just want to suggest that some people don't realize what they actually have. Right? I think that's true of us too. We have an identity in Christ that God has given us that's really powerful.

It got me thinking this week about a signature. How much is a signature worth? So I googled signatures and how much some of the most valuable signatures that are out here. George Washington signed the Acts of Congress and then at signature is worth 9.8 million dollars. Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation is worth 3.7 million dollars. Babe Ruth signed a baseball and that baseball is worth 388,000 dollars. Now maybe those numbers have gone up since Google has reported them, but I'm just suggesting that it's not so much the piece of paper that's valuable; it's the signature that's really valuable that comes very important for us. Of course Christ has placed that signature on our hearts.

Imagine if you were to go back in Israel and they were able to unearth something and they found an actual letter written from Jesus Christ to Peter, for example. They unearthed that and it was signed by Jesus Christ. Can you imagine how much that would sell for? I mean it would be a billion dollars or something because everybody would want to buy that. An actual signature of Jesus Christ? In fact it would probably be set up as an idol with a church all around it and everything. That's probably why there's nothing like that available. It's not the thing; it's the signature that makes it valuable.

The same thing is true in our lives. Our identity isn't based on our performance. It's based on our relationship with Jesus Christ. When we're reflecting Him, great things happen. I'm starting to feel really valuable already. Are you? I want you to feel valuable when you leave here because of this letter that you are that God says that we are.

Here's a quote from Brennan Manning's book, *The Signature of Jesus*, that I think is very appropriate. He says this: "True followers of Jesus (that's you and me), recognize that many of the burning theological questions in the church today are neither burning nor theological. They see Christianity neither as moral code or a belief system, but a love affair. They know that following Jesus means living dangerously and they have no greater desire than to have His signature on the pages of their lives."

What makes us valuable is the signature of Jesus because the letter that we are is written from Christ.

Well the third question is – Who actually wrote it down? So let's look at the passage. It says – *written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God.*

There are a lot of analogies in the Bible that have to do with our understanding of who we are. One of them is the good shepherd and the sheep. I love that illustration because it reminds me of how God cares for me and leads me by quiet waters. That picture is a beautiful picture of the good shepherd that helps me understand God's care.

I like the picture of the vine and the branches where the branch is us and the vine is Jesus. We have to be connected to the vine in order to receive our nourishment, empowerment. That's another great picture in the Bible of who we are as Christians.

I also like the one in the book of Peter where Peter writes in and he says we are all living stones together, forming this church. Because it describes our interrelationship together. No one is an island, but rather we are working together and we are functioning together in these stones to be the people of God.

But this is another analogy, the one about the letter, that I really like because it talks about our identity in Christ. The Holy Spirit is actually writing inside of our hearts. You know what He's doing? He's taking the narrative of life and He's writing the story about it. The person who writes the story often gets to determine how it's perceived.

We know that in the news. Right? You can read a news article about this. One person writes it this way and another person writes it this way, and they have totally different perspectives. I want you to know that when the Holy Spirit writes the story on your heart it has a godly perspective. We need that. He writes right on our hearts. Is the Holy Spirit doing that? That's what makes it valuable.

When it comes to understanding our identity, we could have our identity based (and maybe we should) on the fact that when we were born we were made in the image of God. He planted His image. So I'm like a little version of God. I have His image in my life. So I could rejoice just in that fact that I am created in the image of God.

But here's the problem. The problem is that as soon as I start living, I encounter sin. And that sin wreaks havoc in my life. Either because I make wrong choices, or because other people do things, or just because there's sin around and I get damaged. So we are all broken people. So even though we're stamped in the image of God, we feel this brokenness and it's painful and we go, "Oh man, I'm not really worth very much." And that's why we have to get born a second time.

You see, the man comes to Jesus at night and says to Jesus, "How can I enter the kingdom of God?" And He says, "You need to be *born of water and the Spirit.*" It's the Spirit of God that brings the second birth and it's the second birth that stamps this new identity so that now all the things that are experienced in life are experienced differently.

Yes, we're all broken people. We're damaged people. All of us. Some of us hide it better than others, but we're all broken people. That brokenness is something that God can use to turn into something beautiful because He's writing the story. He takes our brokenness and weaves it through this plan of redemption inside of our hearts so that we can be this letter that goes out. Every one of us are unique because we've each experienced brokenness in a different way. All of us are broken, but you need the gospel message of Jesus Christ that transforms us and changes us from the inside out. The Holy Spirit is doing that work and He's writing in our hearts. What a beautiful part of the letter, the story that Paul is describing here in this passage.

The next question has to do with the paper on which it's written. So if we look at the paper on which it's written, notice it says – *you yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts.* But then on the bottom says – *not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.* This is really a reference to the new covenant, which we're going to amplify more next week because Paul is going to do that in the passage continuing. The old covenant was written on tablets of stone. The new covenant, as prophesied in Jeremiah 31, is written on our own hearts. So God uses our hearts as paper and He writes those things down. He writes the story, the narrative inside of our hearts. If we're writable.

I don't know about you, but every once in a while I'm sent a computer file that I'm supposed to look at or something. I open it up and I start to change it and it says "you do not have permission to change this file." Have you seen that? So I'm going, "Whoa. I want to make a change here." I can't make a change. I don't have permission to change the file. So you have to go to the

permissions of the file. When you go there, it says “read only”. That’s all there is. So I have to change it to “read and write”. So I get permission, then so I can write in the document.

Our hearts are like that. We give permission to the Holy Spirit to write on our hearts. Some people haven’t given that permission, so their story is rather mangled. The story is written in a way that doesn’t have the redemptive story tied into it. So it’s a pretty bad story, a pretty negative story. It’s a problem linked to another problem, to a chain of problems. So no wonder those people feel bad. No wonder they’re feeling negative. But if you allow the Holy Spirit to write the story on your heart, then good things happen. God changes that story. He takes those bad things that are still there. But He takes them and He ties them in a way to redemption in a way that’s amazing.

The last question that I want to look at is the question about who are the recipients of the letter. Notice it says in verse 2 it’s *known and read by everyone*. Other people are looking at us. Just by looking at us they can see Jesus, or a least they should be able to see Jesus.

It’s not too often today people write handwritten notes. Occasionally you get one and that’s like the treasure of the mail. Who wrote this? Somebody wrote a handwritten note. I’m going to look at that first! I mean we use email today or Facebook. Or if you have 140 characters, you think small, then Twitter. You can tell people you’re eating a burrito or whatever you’re doing at the moment. There’s Pinterest and Instagram that are being used now, especially by the younger generations that give a piece of what’s going on.

The question is, how are we reflecting Jesus? In what away are people seeing the letter that’s inside of us? Can people tell by looking at your Facebook account or by watching you talk or by your behavior? Do they see Jesus? See, we’re a letter. We’re representing God to a world that’s very much in need. A world that’s got a lot of problems and challenges that’s looking for answers because their hearts are just written with all kinds of problems. They don’t have the narrative that the Holy Spirit can write or redemption and restoration and healing that God wants in their lives. We’re the letter that says it’s there. I want to share it with you.

Those are five questions that I see in this passage that it provides to give us this sense of identity, which provides us with a mission and a purpose in life.

But I started thinking what kind of letters does God want us to be? I think one of the letters that God wants us to be is a warning letter. It’s not fun to get a warning letter that says you haven’t paid your bill; we’re turning off your whatever. It’s not fun to be a warning letter, but the reality is that there are a lot of warnings in the Bible. People on the wrong path doing the wrong thing are in serious danger. They’re going to get hurt in this world and they’re going to suffer greatly outside of this world.

The passage in Hebrews 9:27 is – *Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment*. That warning is really important. As Christians we can take a stand and say, “Look, you’re doing the wrong thing. Something bad is going to happen to you either now or in the future. It may look like you’re doing fine now, but you’re headed for trouble.” There’s a warning message that we bring as Christians. We are a warning letter to the world that says there’s a holy

God, there's a judgment, there's a right way to live, and there's a wrong way to live. It's not just up to you and what you want to do today. A warning letter. That's part of what we are.

I think a second kind of letter that we are is a thank you letter. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 I says – *Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

This is a play on words that I saw this week that's kind of cute. It says: "Are you humbly grateful? Or grumbly hateful?" Just change the first letters of the words and you end up with something else. It has to do with your perspective.

I think that we want to be humble, grateful people. God has made us thank you notes. That's what we are as we're going around in the world. We're grateful people. We're different than other people. We're grateful, not complaining. There are a lot of grumbly, hateful people in the world. We are different because we bring something different because Christ has sent His letter and the Holy Spirit has written the narrative inside of our hearts, the message that we can share with others.

I supposed that a very important letter is this one. It's the invitation letter with the RSVP, which is French for "répondez s'il vous plait." Something very French that basically says "would you please respond?" That's the message of the gospel, isn't it? Would you please respond? God has sent you an invitation in Jesus Christ. He sent you an invitation that will change your life. Would you respond to that? That's the message that we have as Christians that God has written in our hearts. We are the invitation. I just want to tell you, there's a better way to live, and it starts with a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

And then I like this one – having it be a love letter. Here are the words of Jesus – *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* It's not if you argue the best. It's not if you have the most money, or the fanciest house or clothes or car. It has to do with love. We're this message that goes out, a message of love that God has given to us that we can share with the world.

I just enjoyed this passage this week because it illustrates the importance of our own identity. If we have our identities squared away properly with God then we are on a solid foundation and we're not as easily rattled as other people, not as easily upset. We can experience the joy, we can experience the peace, we can experience that love that God wants us to have. There's something going on inside of us that we're rejoicing in and it's solid. It doesn't fluctuate. The problem with all the other choices is they change. But Jesus Christ never changes.

When my identity is solid in Jesus Christ, then I have this purpose. This purpose that drives me forward, even in the midst of the challenges that are going on. Whether I'm going to school or I've got a job or I don't have a job, or I'm in a marriage, or I'm in a struggling marriage, whatever it is, we have a purpose and the purpose is not just to be happy. The purpose is to be growing in Christ and to reflect Jesus to those around. God wants to do amazing things in our lives. He offers that to us.

But I really like this idea of Him writing the narrative because some people are saying the wrong things inside of their own hearts. And when they say the wrong things inside of their hearts, they're actually recreating the wrong narrative. The Holy Spirit wants to come in and write on our hearts. He wants to write in there. The heart is this place where decisions are made and where we wrestle with things. So when we're wrestling with things that we've done wrong or we're unhappy with, or the pressures of life, when we're wrestling with those things, there's a narrative that could be written in there. It comes from the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts because Jesus Christ died on the cross, and in the midst of that creates this beautiful letter that then is shared with other people.

It's a fascinating thought to consider and it helps me appreciate my identity in Jesus Christ, and I hope it does for you too. If you're here today and you've never accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, that is a good reason to do so. Because God wants to drastically change the way you think about yourself and what He wants to do inside of you to reflect to others.

Let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, we come before you now thanking you for Jesus Christ. That not just two thousand years ago that there was a baby born in a manger, but that Christ is alive today and working in our lives in a powerful way. Lord, we thank you for your love and giving us that gift. We want to be hearts that are open, writable, receiving your message so that we have something to share with others, even in the midst of the brokenness that we experience today. So do that work, we ask. In Jesus name, amen.