

ENGAGE

- We are looking at investment. The investment of self. Paul states that the people of the church in Corinth have been a letter from Christ to him that had been written on his heart.
- We each are writing letters each day to the hearts of those we encounter. Let's choose to make those letters Christlike and not damaging to the hearts of those we meet.
- Rhetorical questions are used for effect and not to get an answer.
 - A few examples of rhetorical questions are: "Is rain wet?", "Do dogs bark?" or "What is the matter with kids today?" My favorite question is, "When are you going to mow the yard?"
 - This question definitely doesn't require a response. Sometimes the answers are so obvious they don't need to be stated and other times there simply isn't an answer. Either way rhetorical questions are used as a literary device to illicit an effect on the reader.
- The Apostle Paul uses two rhetorical questions in 2 Corinthians 3:1.
 - He starts by asking, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?"
 - We think of commend as someone complimenting themselves. This is not what Paul meant.
 - In this context the word 'commend' can be thought of as providing credentials or self-introduction.
 - Does Paul really need to introduce or provide credentials to the very church he founded in Corinth? The answer is so obvious it doesn't require a response.
- Paul's second question about needing letters of recommendation was referring to a very common practice of that day.
 - Letters of recommendation during Paul's time were written for people when they traveled to give them credibility.
 - Someone, usually of a high social order, would write letters of recommendation for those under them.
- During Paul's day if you traveled from one town to the next the only validity of who you are would be your own words.
 - Letters of recommendation would provide trust and credentials to back up your claims. For the Corinthian Church to question Paul's position as an apostle would be for them to question their own faith since he started the church.
 - They can't question Paul without questioning themselves. His credentials are written on their hearts.

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EXAMINE

1. (1-2) Does Paul need a letter of recommendation? He has one – the Corinthian Christians themselves.

Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some *others*, epistles of commendation to you or *letters* of commendation from you? You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men.

a. **Epistles of commendation:** Such letters were common and necessary in the early church. A false prophet or apostle could travel from city to city and easily say, “Paul sent me, so you should support me.” To help guard against problems like this, letters of recommendation were often sent with Christians as they traveled.

i. Paul himself sent **letters of commendation** on many occasions ([Romans 16:1-2](#), [1 Corinthians 16:3, 16:10-11](#), [2 Corinthians 8:16-24](#)). Now Paul will describe *his* letter of recommendation.

b. **You are our epistle:** Paul has a letter of recommendation, but it isn’t written on paper. Paul says the letter is **written in our hearts**, and it is **known and read by all men**.

i. There was nothing wrong with a letter of commendation written on paper, but how much better to have a *living* letter of commendation! The Christians at Corinth, along with groups of Christians wherever Paul had worked, were Paul’s “living letter” to validate his ministry.

ii. The best analogy in today’s world might be a certificate of ordination. Many people think that a certificate of ordination means that you have the credentials of ministry. While there is an important purpose in a public ordination to ministry, a piece of paper in itself never is a proper credential. The true credentials of the ministry are changed lives, living epistles. We might almost say, keep your paper to yourself and show us the changed lives from your ministry.

iii. “Nothing so commends a minister as the proficiency of his people.” (Poole) “The fruitfulness of the people is the preacher’s testimonial.” (Trapp)

iv. Many think the main reason God granted the miraculous signs and wonders among the apostles in the Book of Acts to serve as a “letter of commendation” to their apostolic ministry. If this was the case, it makes sense that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit would cease when the apostles passed from the scene, because there would no longer be an apostolic ministry to authenticate. However, it is significant that Paul does *not* say, “miracles are our epistle of commendation.” Paul apparently did not believe his primary “letter of recommendation” was found in miraculous signs but found in miraculously changed lives.

2. (3) *The writing of Paul’s letter of recommendation.*

Clearly *you are* an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, *that is*, of the heart.

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- a. **An epistle of Christ:** Paul's letter of recommendation has an author, Jesus Christ. The Corinthian Christians were indeed Paul's letter of recommendation, yet he realized that he did not write that letter – Jesus did. Paul is not trying to say, "I made you the Christians you are," but he is saying, "God used me to make you the Christians you are."
- b. **Ministered by us:** Paul's letter of recommendation was written with a "pen" and the "pen" was Paul himself. He "wrote into" the lives of the people he served.
- c. **Written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God:** Paul's letter of recommendation was written with "ink," and the "ink" was the Holy Spirit.
- d. **On tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart:** Paul's letter of recommendation was written on "paper" or **tablets**, and the "paper" was the hearts of the Corinthian Christians.
 - i. The Old Testament prophets looked forward to the New Covenant, when the law of God would be written in our hearts ([Jeremiah 31:33](#)), and said God would grant hearts of flesh to replace hearts of stone ([Ezekiel 11:19](#) and [36:26](#)).

3. (4-6) *Sufficient ministers of a new covenant.*

And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as *being* from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

- a. **We have such trust through Christ toward God:** Paul knows that what he has just written might sound proud in the ears of the Corinthian Christians. After all, it is no small thing to say, "You are my letter of recommendation" and "I am a pen in God's hand." Paul knows these are big ideas, but his place for thinking these big ideas is in Jesus, not in himself.
- b. **Not that we are sufficient of ourselves:** Paul doesn't consider himself **sufficient** for the great task of changing lives for Jesus. Only Jesus is sufficient for such a big job.
 - i. Some people refuse to be used by God because they think of themselves as "not ready," but in a sense, we are never ready or worthy. If we were, the sufficiency would be in ourselves and not from God.
 - ii. "Brethren, if Paul is not sufficient of himself, what are you and I? Where are you... Do you indulge the dream of self-sufficiency? Be ashamed of your folly in the presence of a great man who knew what he said, and who spoke under the direction of the Spirit of God, and wrote deliberately, 'Not that we are sufficient of ourselves.'" (Spurgeon)
 - iii. "Our sufficiency is of God; let us practically enjoy this truth. We are poor, leaking vessels, and the only way for us to keep full is to put our pitcher under the perpetual flow of boundless grace. Then, despite its leakage, the cup will always be full to the brim." (Spurgeon)

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c. **Ministers of the new covenant:** The idea of a **new covenant** was prophesied in the Old Testament ([Jeremiah 31:31](#)) and put into practice by Jesus ([Luke 22:19-20](#)).

i. The ancient Greek word for **covenant** (*diatheke*) had the ordinary meaning of a “last will and testament.” Paul’s use of the word reinforces the sovereignty of God, because it is not a negotiated settlement, but a divine decree.

ii. The word **covenant** describes “An ‘arrangement’ made by one party with plenary power, which the other party may accept or reject, but cannot alter... A covenant offered by God to man was no ‘compact’ between two parties coming together on equal terms.” (Moulton and Milligan)

iii. This **new covenant** presents the terms by which we can have a relationship with God, centered on Jesus and His work for us.

d. **Not of the letter but of the Spirit:** When Paul contrasts **the letter** and **the Spirit**, he isn’t favoring “experience” over “the word,” nor is he favoring allegorical interpretation over a literal understanding of the Bible. Rather Paul shows the superiority of the **new covenant** over the old covenant.

i. The **letter** is the law in its outward sense, written on tablets of stone. The letter of the law came by the old covenant. It was good in itself, but it gave us no power to serve God, and it did not change our heart; it simply told us what to do. Paul can say **the letter kills** because the law, exposing our guilt, “**kills**” us before God. The law thoroughly and completely establishes our guilt.

ii. Paul expresses this point well in [Romans 7:5-6](#): *For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.*

iii. The indwelling **Spirit** then becomes for us a law written on our hearts. He is in us to guide us and be our “law.” It isn’t that the Holy Spirit *replaces* the written law, but *completes* and *fulfills* the work of the written law in our hearts. **The Spirit gives life**, and with this spiritual life, we can live out the law of God.

iv. Therefore, we can’t throw away or neglect our Bibles (which some might say is **the letter**) because now we have **the Spirit**. Instead, **the Spirit** makes us alive to **the letter**, *fulfilling* and *completing* the work of **the letter** in us. We also shouldn’t think this is permission to live our Christian life on experiences or mystical interpretations of the Bible. Experiences and allegories in the Bible have their place, but each must be proved true and supported by studying the literal meaning of the Bible. **The Spirit** and **the letter** are not enemies, but friends. They don’t work against each other, and one is incomplete without the other.

QUESTIONS

- Discuss some of your favorite rhetorical questions.
- Explain the difference between just following the law and having the law written on your heart.

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- Read Hebrews 8:7-12. How do you get the word of God and the new covenant written on your heart?
- Name a person in your life who spoke life changing words upon your heart.
- Read 2 Corinthians 3:4-6. What does it look like in your life to have confidence in Christ?
- What did Paul consider to be his epistle? (1-2)
- How were these epistles written? (3-4)
- Where did Paul's sufficiency come from? (5)
- What steps can we take to begin writing Christ centered messages on the hearts of those we are around.

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