

**“Connected in Transformation”**

2 Corinthians 3

September 10, 2017

As we saw last week, we are connected in the conflict we experience. We are joined into an eternal community in Christ, and when we hurt one another and accuse one another, we hurt the whole! The church, following Christ, then, must be a place of High Truth and High Grace.

There had been great trouble with some doubting God was doing anything through Paul’s ministry. They assumed he was a fraud. His opponents seemed to measure the work of the Gospel based on “power, success and popularity.”<sup>1</sup>

How did Paul respond? How do they know Jesus is at work? His proof of Christ’s power in ministry was their transformation.

God was doing something in them. What do we look to within our own body? What do we have to offer to the world as evidence as proof of God’s work here, at Central? We look and ask the question, “Are we changing?”

<sup>3</sup> Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? <sup>2</sup> You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. <sup>3</sup> And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

<sup>4</sup> Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. <sup>5</sup> Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, <sup>6</sup> who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

<sup>17</sup> Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup> And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

You can tell something about a giver by examining the gift. I have an uncle who tends to give very interesting and unpredictable gifts. Once he brought over to our home 50 lbs of sweet potatoes because he got a great deal on many, many more pounds than that! It would have taken him months to eat all the sweet potatoes he ate. But this reveals something about him. He didn’t buy them all for himself; he bought way too much for his family so that he could give them away. You can tell he is thrifty—and generous—by the gifts he offers. You can tell something about a giver by taking note of their gifts.

The same is true in the church. We can tell something about the Lord, the primary Giver, by taking note of the gifts he presents to us. And yet, God’s gifts go further than ours. Not only do God’s gifts reflect his gracious and generous heart, but also they have the power to transform us to be like him! We experience his power in the gifts he pours out; we also become like him when he gives us himself.

What does Paul lay out here that God gives his church?

**New heart**

When we look at v. 1, *Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?* we may wonder what Paul is doing? He on numerous occasions in this letter and in 1 Corinthians commends his ministry to the Corinthians, so why is he so negative about commendation here? There is exegetical debate as to whether Paul intends this as a statement or a question. Nevertheless, the point seems to be that perhaps they were starting again at square one.

Here is how: In his day, public figures or speakers often carried with them letters of recommendation to gain a hearing with a new group. It is a little bit like the endorsements we see on book jackets these days. When you see a new work from an author with whom you are not familiar, perhaps you look to see what others have said. If JI Packer has endorsed, or RC Sproul, or Tim Keller, or some other Reformed acolyte, then you know it is good. Something similar

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<sup>1</sup> Mark A. Seifrid, *2 Corinthians*, Pillar NTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 107.

happened in the ancient world. But here is the distinction. Paul already knew them, and they him. By asserting, perhaps we are needing a letter of commendation again, he suggests that maybe we are starting our relationship all over again.

But, v. 2, they don't require a written letter. Why? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation. V. 3, you are a letter from Christ [i.e. produced by Christ] delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.

Using the metaphor of writing a letter, Paul is saying that you, Corinthians—people—are the letter, and the author of that letter is Christ! And we (Paul) delivered it, or continuing the metaphor, inscribed it. So what he's saying is that I don't really need a letter to vouch for my ministry because YOU serve as that letter authored by Jesus himself alive in you, and ministered to through my proclamation of the gospel! How so?

This is not just any old letter written in ink, but instead by the Spirit of God, not on tablets of stone but on human hearts! Here Paul is recalling two Old Testament passages: one from Ezekiel 36 where God promised to remove from his people our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh. And in Jeremiah 31 in the prophecy of the New Covenant, where he promised that he would place his law *within* our hearts.

The promise *then* was that the day was coming when the Spirit would do a new kind of work within his people. No longer would the law, the good commands of God, be external to us written on stone as they were given to Moses. Now the "writing" of the Spirit would be internal, on hearts, instead of on tablets of stone! Paul's point was this is happening now, through the ministry of Jesus—in you! That's proof of God's work among us, YOU having new hearts. Proof was that God had done spiritual open heart surgery and made these people, his people new.

I read this week about Dr. Christiaan Barnard, the first person ever to do a human to human heart transplant in 1967. His second patient was a fellow physician, whom Barnard knew would be very interested in the details of the procedure. One night shortly after the surgery, Dr. Barnard asked his patient if he would like to see his old heart. So he drew from a cupboard and glass container with the patient's heart inside: the first person ever to hold his own heart in his hands.

So he began to pepper Barnard with questions about the procedure. Then, he handed the jar back and pronounced, "So this is my old heart that caused me so much trouble." He put it aside, and left it forever.<sup>2</sup>

This physically is what Paul and Ezekiel and Jeremiah are saying God does, what he gives to us. He takes out our old hearts of sin and death, and gives us new hearts, and he inscribes his life-giving commands on these new hearts that we might live as new people in a new community.

Jesus has taken our guilt upon himself on the cross, taken our sin in his body to the grave, and gives us new life in the victory of being raised from the dead. **And** he has begun the powerful work of remaking us. Surely we remain the same people, but our hearts have been reborn, made new, with God's law and truth overwriting the sinful desires of our hearts.

Now that does not mean that we will change in every way we may want to change. Neither does it mean that we will change as fast as we desire to change. But it does mean that we will change because the Spirit is making us new!

That newness in the church—being now no longer who we once were-- is what Paul points out as evidence of God at work. Can you see it here? Is anybody new? Is anyone experiencing change. God is doing it.

Further, this is the gift we have for the world. The church is not the place where you come when your life is put right. The church is the place where God does his work of giving new hearts, new desires, and new life. We come precisely **WHEN** we are most broken and shattered, and the Lord is present to make us new. Do you feel too far gone? You are not. Do you feel too shattered, nothing can be done? You are not. For the Spirit takes our stony hearts and gives us hearts that live. And he does it here.

### New Sufficiency

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<sup>2</sup> John Blanchard, *the Truth for Life* (West Essex, UK: H.E. Walter, 1982), p. 231, cited in Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), p. 65.

Look at verses 4-5. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. <sup>5</sup>Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God. Paul's statement that he was not sufficient was not a ploy, or manipulation to get them to sympathize with him. Rather, he knew it was true! By reminding this flock under his care of his lack of sufficiency, he was calling to mind Moses from Exodus 4 where he told God, "I can't do it. I'm weak and can't speak well. Send someone else. I'm not sufficient." But the Lord told him, "I'll be with you. Who made your mouth after all?" And he sent Aaron along with him. God didn't remove the difficulty; he used a work around, gave him a new sufficiency that wasn't about Moses, but about God's power.

The pattern of God doing something in and through people follows this principle: our insufficiency is the foreground for God's sufficiency to shine. The Old Testament is replete with examples. Gideon in Judges 6, "How can I save your people. My tribe is weakest." God answered, "I shall be with you." Jeremiah said, "I don't know how to speak. I'm too young." 1:6. God answered, "Don't say that, only go where and say what I command." On and on. Timothy in his youth. All met by God himself being the ground and power at work.

This does not mean that we are called to do something *because* we are insufficient to the task. I'm fairly sure I'm insufficient to design an airplane, and neither is God calling me to do so, for example. And yet, for God sized actions, our insufficiency is the starting line. In fact, we could say that recognition of our insufficiency is a part of God's call on our lives. Our weaknesses and insufficiency are the living tablets upon which God writes his incredible power to work, save and restore. Oswald Chambers once wrote:

God can achieve his purpose either through the absence of human power and resources, or the abandonment of reliance upon them. All through history, God has used nobodies, because their unusual dependence upon him made possible the unique display of his power and grace. He chose and used somebodies only when they renounced dependence on their natural abilities and resources.<sup>3</sup>

Here is my paraphrase: God does something with those who have the humility to realize that they are nobodies. God does nothing with those who see themselves as somebodies. Friends, this is as much for me as anybody. For our leaders and teachers. If any of us think we are somebodies, we are in a danger zone spiritually. May the Lord give us eyes to see the truth, and fearless hearts of faith to be honest. Which are we? <sup>5</sup>"Not that we are sufficient in ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God."

If God is calling you to something-- ministry to kids, reaching out to your neighbor, a deeper friendship, serving our city in a new or scary way maybe alongside someone who doesn't look like you or is very different from you—don't hide behind your insufficiencies, weaknesses. Your awareness of your insufficiency is the very ground, the foundation of his calling in your life. Once you see your inability, ask the God who is calling you to give you his strength, power and sufficiency for His work through you.

### New Glory in Transformation

Because God has given us new hearts by faith, the work of transformation is underway. We don't belong to ourselves any longer; we belong to him. And he begins the work of making us look more like him in family resemblance V. 18 *And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.*

The background here is Exodus 32-34 where Moses was in the very presence of God being given the Ten Commandments. He was in the presence of God and began to reflect God's glory, to brilliantly shine requiring a veil before others when he came down from the mountain. And yet the veil is no longer necessary. We, by the Spirit have been given a face to face relationship with the Lord, and because of the blood of Jesus, we need not shrink away from it. Instead, as we gaze upon, spend time in his presence, find our joy in the crucified and risen Jesus, finding our glory in the incredible truth of the gospel that Jesus died that we might have life, then our distorted image of our shame of sin is removed and we become more like that same crucified and risen Jesus! What Paul is saying is that if you are in relationship with Jesus you are not today what you were yesterday. You will not be tomorrow what you are today. Because you are being transformed by the work of the Spirit. It is true for all of us, the pastor included. Every one of us

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), p. 69.

are in the middle of sanctification, of transformation, which calls for great grace with each other—me included when I fail and disappoint—and also great hope together that Christ is at work.

How do we know, what is our proof, what is our letter of recommendation that God is here? The answer: can you see Jesus here? In twinkling fits and starts in your neighbor? In our loves being shaped to love what and who Jesus loves? In our willingness to open our lives and homes to the lost and the stranger, as Jesus did. In a radical grace that forgives and moves toward relationships that may be hard. In finding ways to make self-small and serve another out of the limelight, as Jesus did. The Spirit makes us as individuals and we together as a congregation to reflect to the world what Jesus looks like. Can we find him here?

As we come to the Table this morning, do you believe? Do you believe your need for a Savior like Jesus, and further, do you believe the amazing promises of what his grace does to change, transform, to begin to rebuild you from the inside out?

One day, we will stand not before the Table, but before the glorious presence of Christ himself, and on that great day of judgment we will be filled with great joy, as all Creation, with one another and even, as one old Scottish preacher suggested, even the angels will gasp in praise of God to say, “look how much like Christ this one has become!” For THAT is the work of the Spirit. To make us like Christ.

We know something about the giver from the gifts he gives. The Lord, the great Giver, has given us himself, and what’s more, he makes us more like him. As we are transformed to be more like Jesus by the Spirit, then we, as the church, become God’s letter of commendation to the world.