

The Book of 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 2:15-3:3

Session 24: Life Unto Life, part 2

2 Corinthians 2:15 For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: ¹⁶ **To the one *we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life.*** And who *is* sufficient for these things?

This message has an effect on everyone who hears it, but not the same effect. To some, the message and life of Paul is not appealing, and to them, this kind of life carries the savor of death. They see the suffering that Paul endures and they cannot imagine that to be God's will.

But to others, they see it for what it is; glorious and full of grace! For them, it carries the savor of life. By bearing in his body the dying of the Lord Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:10), Paul is the one who is really living. Isn't it odd that the same message can produce two very different results?

Obviously, Paul sees it, and he sees it as "life unto life." What does that expression mean? It means that Paul sees the expenditure of his life as resulting in a life that he otherwise would not have. In other words, he sees the sufferings not as a means of "death" but as a means of "life." And that life is a life unlike any that this world can offer. Only God can take one of his sons or daughters, and allow them to encounter the sufferings of Christ, and by those sufferings give them life, but not just any life; His life. God's life in us results in an abundant life that is incomparable with any other.

Back in Israel's program, this same "life" principle was taught by Jesus.

Matthew 10:39 He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.

Mark 8:34 And when he had called the people *unto him* with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. ³⁵ For whosoever will save his

life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.

Luke 17:33 Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.

John 12:25 He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.

And now, look what Paul has to say in verse 16.

2 Corinthians 2:16 To the one *we are* the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. **And who is sufficient for these things?**

What is Paul asking? What Paul is asking is, "Who, by status, ability or capacity is qualified for this life which is offered to us?" The obvious answer is, "no one." Which is exactly why thoughts of being inadequate are natural, and why the effects of discouragement and despondency are felt by us all, especially when faced with the mockery of those who oppose us and our message.

This is why verse 15 tells us the "savor" is "unto God" which means we should not be troubled by what others say. Not everyone will approve, but that is not what we are after. Yes, we want people to hear and accept the truth, but not everyone will.

The temptation here is to change the word of God so that two things are true:

1) we can get a favorable response from people, and 2) so we can avoid the attacks. But the goal is not the favorable response of people, but the positive response of our Father.

2 Corinthians 2:17 For **we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God:** but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.

We do not dilute the message to get people on board. When we allow the rejection of people to produce feelings of failure and inadequacy, that tells us that we are not looking in the right place; we are looking at results instead of looking at God. When we remain faithful to the message, when we are faithful to live the doctrine, of course we will be attacked and maligned and criticized. But where are those coming from, and what are they designed to do? They are not coming from

God, and they are designed to discourage us. So, while it is not fun to hear those things, we have to stop believing the things the sufferings put in our minds and instead, start believing the doctrine written right here in 2 Corinthians 2.

We don't have to be the apostle to the Gentiles to undergo these attacks, but we do have to be faithful to publish the message. And there are many ways to do that: 1) by conversations, 2) by giving them a resource (book), 3) by a letter or card, and 4) by counselling them in a difficult situation.

Paul triumphs over the personal attacks made against him by lining up his thinking, and then his conduct, with the truth contained in verses 15-16. Paul knows the sufferings of Christ (SoC) are designed to make him "feel a certain way." The hook is to get him thinking about those feelings, instead of the truth in God's word.

So, in the end, Paul triumphs over the personal attacks against him by understanding that his life and message are going to be rejected by some and accepted by others, and that neither of those are in his control. So, Paul is not measuring himself by either of those, but by his faithfulness to make Christ known. This is not just about publishing the gospel of Christ, but also to make known the mystery of Christ.

When we are attacked by the sufferings of Christ, we also keep our thinking focused on making the knowledge of Christ known in every place, for then, we are, unto God, a sweet savor of Christ.

2 Corinthians 2:17 For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God:
but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.

"But as of sincerity" means that what Paul has spoken and how Paul has behaved is true to the doctrines he proclaims, without being influenced by other interests.

"But as of God" means that Paul feels his message and his life are the result of a divine commission from God.

"In the sight of God" means those things which Paul has spoken and the life he has lived was with the understanding that God has heard and seen all of it.

This knowledge, that things are “in the sight of God” is what works to make a man sincere and honest. Therefore, Paul uses this phrase to describe the honesty of his words and actions. This is why, when giving testimony in a legal setting, we have people place their hand on the word of God and promise to tell the truth, because the implication is that what we are saying is “in the sight of God,” which is why the oath ends with, “so help me God.”

“Speak we in Christ” means that all Paul has said and how he has conducted himself has been in service to Christ, and even more, what he has said and his behavior has been in the place of Christ. In other words, Paul is saying by this final phrase, “If Christ Himself was here, He would have said the same thing to you, and His behavior would have been the same toward you.”

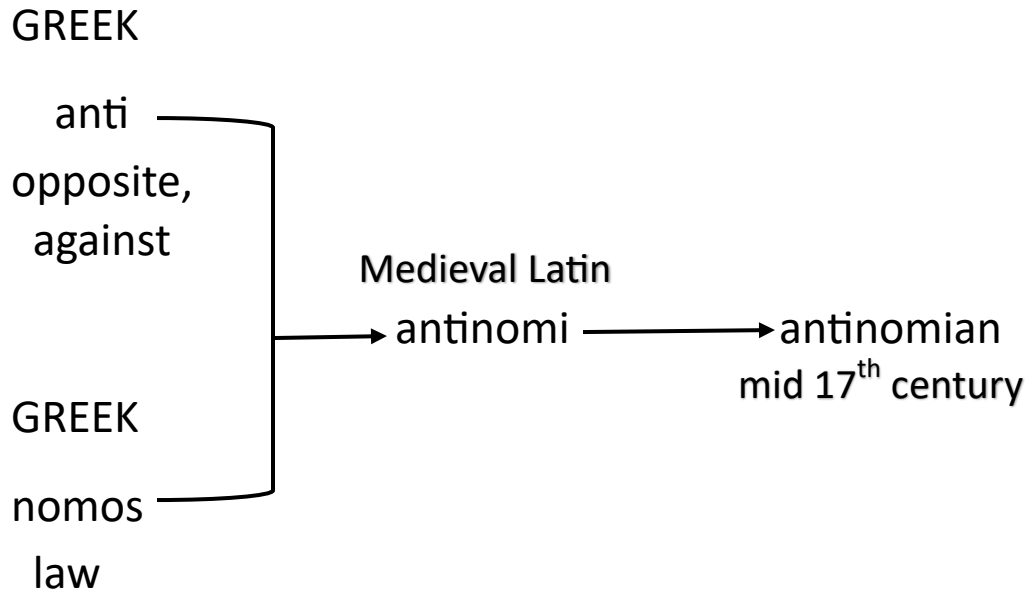
And when these things are true (and we know them to be true for us as they were for Paul), then those attacks will not have their intended effect on us either.

That brings us to the next category of the sufferings of Christ. In chapter 2, Paul has made an honest defense of both his ministry and himself. Saying that his words and actions are Christ’s words and actions is quite the admission. Paul did not say anything in verse 17 that wasn’t true, but he also knows that by saying those things, he has opened himself up to charges he has heard before: pride, boasting and self-sufficiency.

For this, and another reason, which we shall shortly discuss, Paul opens with a couple of questions, which should answer any questions of pride.

In this third category, Paul is charged with, 1) lacking any acceptable accreditations for being in the ministry of teaching God’s word, and 2) being unorthodox and/or heretical in teaching God’s word, and especially for being antinomian.

Let’s begin with defining that last term. Antinomianism is the belief that Christians are freed by grace from the obligation of observing the moral law. The term literally means “against the law.”



Some have held that antinomianism is heresy because it asserts that “faith or salvation alone is sufficient for eternal security, regardless of one’s actions.” If this were all there were to antinomianism, I might be inclined to agree with it.

But the real issue comes from the belief that since the believer’s sins have been atoned for by Christ, then they are now free to live without moral restrictions. Although those who hold to antinomianism use Paul’s doctrine as their proof, I think it is obvious that Paul nowhere teaches such nonsense, else why have the church break fellowship with the man committing incest, or withdrawing fellowship from those believers who are living in fornication?

Just because our sins are atoned for is not now a license to live immorally as though God has no expectation of righteous living; quite the contrary. Yet, this is what Paul is being accused of.

Quite the contrary, our justification is what equips us to live for God in the practical application of our sanctification.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul opens with two questions.

2 Corinthians 3:1 Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some *others*, epistles of commendation to you, or *letters* of commendation from you?

As I have already stated, these questions are meant to head off any charges of ego and pride, but there is something more working behind these questions.

Let's get some background. At least a few of the house churches in Corinth had false teachers who had established themselves, not by the working of miracles, and not by imparting spiritual gifts to the Corinthians, but by producing some letters of recommendation from some brethren in Judea, and by touting their own talents.

It is with this in mind that Paul asks the Corinthians, if it was necessary for him to prove his apostleship to them a second time? This is the gist of the first question.

2 Corinthians 3:1 Do we begin again to commend ourselves?

Looking at the second question...

2 Corinthians 3:1 ...or need we, as some *others*, epistles of commendation to you, or *letters* of commendation from you?

...Paul is asking if it is necessary for him, as it evidently is for some others (the false apostles), to produce a letter of recommendation either to or from the Corinthians.

Is Paul against letters of recommendation? I don't think so, since he has written some himself. He wrote to the Corinthians recommending Timothy.

1 Corinthians 16:10 Now if Timotheus come, see that he may be with you without fear: for he worketh the work of the Lord, as I also *do*.¹¹ Let no man therefore despise him: but conduct him forth in peace, that he may come unto me: for I look for him with the brethren.

Paul also commended Titus, and Phoebe, and Timothy together with Epaphroditus, and later, Onesiphorus. If these questions are rhetorical, then what is Paul's point? Firstly, in light of his lengthy association with the Corinthians, he needed no such letters. What good would human recommendations be when Paul has presented his true credentials, authorized by Christ Himself?

Even so, Paul will answer these questions beginning in verse 2, but before we look at Paul's answer, let me give us a breakdown of the doctrine.

3:1-18 – constitutes the entirety of the doctrine pertaining to this 3rd category of the sufferings of Christ.

3:1 – The questions which Paul uses to introduce this next category of the sufferings of Christ.

3:2-16 – A description of the “just” things which need to be understood in order to dismiss the charges against Paul.

3:2-3: Paul’s letter of commendation

3:4-6: Paul’s confidence in his ministry

3:7-11: The New Testament ministration of the Spirit

3:12-16: The Old Testament ministration under Moses

3:17-18 – The establishment of the New Testament and its sonship edification, which shows Paul to be just, and not unorthodox or heretical.

Now, let’s take up our study in verse 2, where Paul is answering the questions about his own letters of commendation.

2 Corinthians 3:2 Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: ³ *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.

Paul’s answer is “You Corinthians are our letter of recommendation.” They are living, breathing letters of recommendation for Paul’s message and ministry. And in a sense, so are we.

The conversion of the Corinthians by Paul’s gospel, and their subsequent learning was a better testimonial of his credentials and character than any letters could be.

But notice the way the verse is written.

2 Corinthians 3:2 **Ye are our epistle written in our hearts**, known and read of all men:

And epistle is a letter. Paul is saying that the Corinthians themselves are the letter that is written in his (our) heart. What does that mean? It means that the work God has done in the Corinthians is a proof to Paul, of God's appointment of him as an Apostle. They are God's letter of commendation written in Paul's heart. Do you see what Paul is saying? Paul is saying that they (their salvation and spiritual development) are God's way of convincing Paul of his apostleship, which was more valuable than any letter written with ink.

2 Corinthians 3:2 Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, **known and read of all men:**

Because Corinth was a large and splendid city, the church at Corinth (their conversion and Christian conduct) would be known by many who passed through, and that knowledge would be talked about all over the world. People around the world would hear of them, of their instruction under Paul, of their labors for the Lord; that is what it means that they will be a letter, which is "known and read of all men."

Not only in that way, but Paul himself would continue to speak of them wherever he went.

Not only that, but there are two inspired letters that were written specifically to them, and those letters would be copied and spread abroad so that the whole of Christendom would hear and know of the Corinthians.

It has been said that the lives of Christians are the only religious books the world reads. It is with this in mind that I quote a letter written by Ignatius¹ to the Ephesians: *"Give unbelievers the chance of believing through you. Consider yourselves employed by God; your lives the form of language in which He addresses them. Be mild when they are angry, humble when they are haughty; to their blasphemy oppose [by] prayer without ceasing; to their inconsistency, a steadfast adherence to your faith."*

¹ Ignatius of Antioch: An early Christian bishop and martyr (35-108 A.D). He is primarily known for seven letters he wrote in Greek as he journeyed to Rome for execution. Those letters were to churches in Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, and Smyrna. That final letter was written to Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, who gathered the letters of Ignatius, copied them and sent them out as a group.

When Paul says, “Ye are our epistle written in our hearts,” he is saying that they have been inscribed on his heart, written there permanently so they can never be forgotten. These are Paul’s spiritual children and he thinks about them constantly, and with good reason. They are evidence of the power of the gospel; they are the fruit of Paul’s ministry. Even those who could not read were able to read the epistle of the lives of the Corinthians.

By shifting the proof of his apostleship from himself to the Corinthians, if Paul is not genuine, then they are false too.

2 Corinthians 3:3 *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.

Paul is careful to say that he is not the author of this living letter of the Corinthians; they are “the epistle of Christ.” Yes, Christ used Paul’s ministry to deliver the message, but all the spiritual work of conversion, and transformation and edifying was done in the inner man of the Corinthians and Paul could not do any of that.

This is amazing when you think about what is being said here; the Corinthians are the living letters of Christ, and they are embedded deep into Paul’s heart.

2 Corinthians 3:3 *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.

This writing can only be done by the Spirit of God being given to them. The “tables of stone” harken us back to the Ten Commandments and the giving of the Law. And this is where Paul begins to talk about something very marvelous; the glorious superiority of the New Testament over the Old Testament.

2 Corinthians 3:2 *Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: ³ 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.*

While we will never diminish the written word of God, and Paul is not doing that either, the point here is that the written epistle is meant to have such an impact on us that we are transformed into living examples of the written word. This has prompted the saying that “You may be the only Bible someone reads.”

What Paul is saying is that the fact that these Corinthians were believers in Jesus Christ was, in itself, a powerful testimony to God’s work in them, and at the same time, a validation of Paul’s ministry to them. What better letter of commendation could one have?

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