



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

2 Corinthians 3: 1-6

Winter 2025

"Life-Changing Truth"

TRANSCRIPT

Well, we are in 2 Corinthians, and we are beginning chapter 3. We're going to look at verses 1 through 6. And verse 1, *(of chapter 3)*, really is an extension of verse 17, *(of chapter 2)*, where Paul wrote, "For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God."

So he has been identifying a problem there, (which he'll develop much more in the chapters to come, later in the book), of false teachers, false apostles, 'missionaries' that had come and were disturbing them; and he begins to speak about that here. I think the meaning of this statement that he made in verse 17 is, 'We are not peddling the gospel.' And then he begins in chapter 3;

3 Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? *(In other words, 'Are we talking bigly about ourselves?')*, Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? ² You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; ³ being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for 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.

⁴ Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. ⁵ Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as *coming* from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, ⁶ who also made us adequate *as* servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

2 Corinthians 3: 1-6

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word, and bless our time of study in it.
Let's bow in prayer.

Father, we thank You for this time together; it's a blessing to be gathered with Your people in this company together. We can watch things on the live feed, we can listen to recordings, and it's all a blessing and a help; and we're thankful for the technology that allows all that—but it's best to be with Your people in the flesh and be able to visit with one another, and think together, and pray together. And so we thank You for this time, and we pray You'd bless us in it.

Bless what we've read, bless it to our hearts, use it to change us. May the time we spend in consideration of these verses be helpful to each one of us, enlighten us—and through that, sanctify us, conform us increasingly to the image of Your Son; that's how it takes place. Sanctification is in connection with Your Word; it uses everything in our lives actually—our friends, our experiences in life, the hardships of life...they're all tools of Yours. But it's the Word that feeds us and changes us.

And so LORD, this should be a time of transformation for us, this important moment in the week...and so bless us; build us up in the faith. Help us to understand Your sovereign grace, and Your goodness to us, and Your greatness, and make that effective in our lives.

So bless us spiritually, LORD, but we also pray for the material needs we have. We are dependent upon You for every breath of life we take. Every beat of our heart is given to us by You, and so we pray for the material needs we have. We think of those who are going through very difficult treatments, physical difficulties—bless them.

Bless us now LORD, as we sing our next hymn, and then bless us as we spend time in Your Word. May the Spirit of God teach us, guide us, and bless us.

We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

(Message) As the story goes, a converted cannibal was sitting by a fire, cooking and reading his Bible when an anthropologist walked by and said, "Modern man has rejected that book. It's a pack of lies, and you shouldn't waste your time reading it." The former cannibal looked him over from head to foot and said, "If it wasn't for this book, you'd be on that fire." *[Laughter]*

The moral of the story is, 'The Gospel is life changing truth.' It is what Paul called, in Romans chapter 1, verse 16, "...the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes..." It was for Paul; it changed him from 'Saul the persecutor' to 'Paul the apostle.' It changed the Corinthians from sinners to saints. Paul refers to that great change that takes place in the believer, in the saint, here in 2 Corinthians chapter 3, verses 1 through 6.

In verses 1 through 3 he continued his defense of his integrity in an apostleship, which had been questioned by some critics in the church. Some were, (we will learn), false teachers, false apostles. Paul defended himself at the end of chapter 2, (vs17), by stating he conducted his ministry, "from sincerity." He was authentic; he was selfless, not like those "peddling" the Gospel for financial gain.

But he recognized that that boast might seem like self-praise, and could open him up to the charge of being self-serving...of bragging. Evidently that charge had been made before, so anticipating that accusation, Paul wrote in verse 1, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?" In other words, 'Are you going to accuse me, again, of self-praise and insincerity?'

The fact is, it's almost impossible to defend oneself without some self-approval. Paul's opponents forced him to declare his integrity—and then they blamed him for doing it. He then asked, "...do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you?" (vs1b).

The "some" that he's referring to there is probably the missionaries who had come, these false teachers who had come, and they had brought with them to Corinth, letters, 'letters of commendation'. And those type letters were common in the ancient

world...like a letter that would recommend a friend or a servant to another man, say for some employment. Gentiles did it. Jews did it. And the church did it; at the end of the Book of Romans, Paul did it. He commended, "our sister Phoebe", to the church there. (Rom 16:1).

Now, Paul's question here, (vs1), was rhetorical. It implies the answer, 'Of course we don't need letters!' And the reason he didn't is given in verse 2, "You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men..." The Corinthians themselves were his credentials. They were, 'a human letter', as it were, and one that was read by all men.

The Corinthian church was well known throughout the world for the change that had occurred in the lives of these saints, in the lives the people there. Corinth was 'Sin City'; full of pagan temples and brothels, a very materialistic city—a wealthy, worldly place. And Paul came there armed with only the Gospel...and lives were changed. He stated that in 1 Corinthians chapter 6, verses 9 through 11, where he lists their sins, then wrote, "Such were some of you..." But no longer—they were "washed", he said in verse 11, "sanctified", and "justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ."

They had become known widely for the profound change God had produced in them because of Paul's preaching the Gospel there—and *that*, he said, 'was his letter, proof, of his apostleship.' Now, Paul didn't disparage the use of letters of commendation; as I said, he used one, at least, at the end of the Book of Romans—they served a good purpose.

But what he was saying here was that he had something far better than a letter—and that was the Corinthians themselves. They were his letter. They were, as it were, 'living letters'. And he said they were, 'written in his heart', (vs2), which is a way of saying, 'They were very special to him, very much objects of his affection.'

He loved the Corinthians. They may have questioned Paul's integrity and his sincerity—but he didn't question their authenticity. He knew they were a real work of God. He wrote in verse 3 that they were, 'manifested as a letter of Christ', so the Author

of their spiritual story, the Author of their lives is Jesus Christ. It's the story of God's grace and power—"the life changing" power of the Gospel.

Paul and Silas and Timothy brought the message to them. He wrote, you were "cared for by us." (vs3). But they weren't responsible for making the Corinthians the people that they were. They were agents in doing it, but they weren't responsible for that. —That was Christ, through the Holy Spirit, by the Word of God. They were "letters" written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts. The Corinthians were written on Paul's heart—and the grace and character of the living God were written on their hearts.

The change in their way of life that was visible to all, "read by all men", (vs2b), as Paul said, and was due to a fundamental change in their inner life, their inner being. They were *born again*; they were 'new creatures.' (2Cor 5:17).

That's what Paul was saying, and that's what Christianity is about. Christianity is not about moral rearmament. It's not about moral improvement, or financial improvement. It's not about, 'becoming better people'. It's about 'becoming *new* people' —having new minds, and new hearts, and a new will, and new affections, new loves.

God changes people from the inside out, and that inner change is described as, 'one the Holy Spirit has written on the heart'. (vs3). It was 'spiritual writing', not writing with ink. Ink fades; it can be rubbed off. —But the writing of the Holy Spirit is permanent. It inscribes blessings in a person that can never be changed, never removed, never fail. It is permanent.

That inner change is what God promised through His ancient prophets with the *New Covenant*. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel promised that God would give His people 'a new heart'. He would take out, 'the heart of stone', and He would replace it with 'a heart of flesh, a living heart'. He would, 'write His law on their heart'. That's Jeremiah 31, (vs33), and Ezekiel 36, (vs26). Both are a way of describing *spiritual enablement*.

Moses had received the Law on tablets of stone—but that didn't change the people. The Law is true, the Law is holy, and it is good—but it is external. It couldn't cause people to live obediently. So God promised to do, 'a spiritual operation', 'a spiritual heart transplant', and write His law there—and make men able to do the law, do the requirements of God's will for our lives, through, not our own power, but through the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells in them—in us.

Now that had clearly happened to these Corinthians. They had been 'born again'. They were 'new' on the inside, and it was evident from what was seen on the outside—what was seen in their behavior. And that change in them gave Paul "confidence"; he said that in verse 4, "Such confidence we have through Christ toward God." In other words, 'The change in them was real. It encouraged him greatly, and it confirmed to him the genuineness of his ministry', —and it should have done that for the Corinthians.

But this wasn't boasting on Paul's part. Now he was 'boasting in the LORD'...but that's not boasting in himself. He wasn't expressing 'self-competence', but he was expressing self-confidence. Certainly confidence...not in self, though. And he could do that, have that sense of confidence, because of the Lord God.

Earlier, as Paul considered the magnitude of his ministry, and that the Gospel liberates some with life and it condemns others to death, he asked, in chapter 2, verse 16, (which we covered last week), "Who is adequate for these thing?" And I think as a person considers the magnitude of the ministry, (what it involved), one must be impressed with that. Who...who can do this?

This is a powerful, life changing ministry, but also a life condemning ministry. We've seen how it transforms lives—the Corinthians were an example of that; they were 'trophy of God's grace'. But there are also examples of the power of the Gospel to convict the sinner—we see that in various places.

One place is in Acts chapter 24. Paul was a prisoner in Caesarea when he spoke to the Roman governor, Felix. Felix had an interest in the faith. He asked Paul to tell him

about it, and Paul did—and he did so boldly. He talked to him about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come. He talked to him about the Gospel, about the importance of believing, and the danger of not believing. About justification, sanctification...and about the judgment to come if all that's ignored.

So he talked to him about damnation. That's not an easy subject to raise with an unbeliever. It's not an easy subject to raise with anybody, I think, but certainly not with an unbeliever, and one who's ignorant of judgment. Felix was a Roman, but his wife, Drusilla, was a Jewess. So he had some knowledge of Christianity and what at that time was called "the Way". (Acts 9:2). Still, Luke wrote that he listened and, "became frightened." The King James Version translates it, "Felix trembled." (Acts 24:25).

That's the effect of the Word of God on some people. This was a man of great power; he had authority to release Paul if Paul behaved. It takes courage to give the truth to a man such as that, knowing what the consequences may be. It must be done clearly; it must be done tactfully; it must be done appropriately. —We should always present the Gospel in that way. But still, it's not easy. We're tempted to, 'trim our sails', so to speak, to 'tailor the message', 'tone it down', perhaps. Paul didn't do that.

So who is adequate for these things!? None of us is. Paul knew he wasn't. When he first came to Corinth he didn't come with "persuasive words", (1Cor 2:4)—he came armed only with the simple Gospel. There is nothing of self in it; his work was obviously a work of God. So, the Corinthians were his "letter"; they were his 'credentials'.

Again, Paul didn't claim self-competence, but he did have self-confidence. Or perhaps the 'self' shouldn't be added to that...he had confidence because, as he wrote in verse 5, "...our adequacy is from God...". We are adequate. You are adequate in Him; He's our sufficiency.

Now that conviction is essential to have if we're going to progress in the work of the Gospel—if we're going to progress in the Christian life. We can obey. We can go forward confidently because we know that God is with us, God is in us, God is, "our sufficiency", (2Cor 3:5),—and when we don't believe that, we fail.

At Kadesh-barnea, Israel did not enter Canaan because of a failure of faith. They saw giants in the land, and they felt like grasshoppers. In their minds, God wasn't sufficient; He was not their "adequacy." (vs5).—So they spent their next 38 years wandering...and dying in the wilderness. The next generation learned the lesson and eagerly went in with faith, beat the giants, and conquered the land.

Paul did the same. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 2, verse 3, that he was in Corinth, "...in weakness and in fear and in much trembling..." But, he was there *in* Christ—and in faith and obedience he succeeded.

This is one of the great truths that is repeated throughout 2 Corinthians, that 'In weakness we are strong.' And our weakness often proves the total sufficiency of God's grace. When we cannot depend on ourselves, when we put no confidence or trust in our own abilities, and we look wholly and completely to the LORD, there is success. There is success in that.

And the result of Paul's labors in Corinth prove that God was working through him—that Paul was His servant. How else do you explain such great things, such great results occurring through such a weak person? "...In weakness and in fear and much in trembling...", (ibid.), this congregation was brought into existence. That's the work of God through His servant. Paul didn't have 'letters' like the false teachers had. He had something better...he had the Corinthians. They were his 'letter', his 'credentials'—the proof that he was a servant of God.

But Paul had something else his critics in Corinth did not have, and that is a specific '*call*' from God. He speaks of that in verses 5 and 6; "...our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate *as* servants of a new covenant..." That word, "*made*", is a 'past tense', so it looks back to the past, it looks to a particular moment, a specific occasion when God '*called*' him into the office of an apostle—and gave him the sufficiency to minister. That happened at his conversion when he met the Lord on the

Damascus road—and then later in a house on Straight Street in Damascus, where he received the Holy Spirit when Ananias visited him.

The Lord spoke to Ananias and called Paul, "...a chosen instrument of Mine to bear My name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the sons of Israel:" (Acts 9:15). Christ chose Paul to be an apostle. He 'fitted' him for service. He made him 'adequate' for the ministry. That is the reason for his competence...and the reason for our competence, our ability. God *called* Paul, *appointed* Paul, and *used* Paul with the result that the Corinthians were made members of the New Covenant and all of its blessings.

Paul has referred to those blessings in verse 3, where he contrasted God's imprint on the Corinthian hearts, and contrasted that, with the Law that's written on stone tablets. Here he comes back to the difference between them: The New Covenant is the ministry of the Spirit, not 'the letter'. "...for...", Paul explained, "...the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (vs6b).

Now the reason Paul referred to these two ministries, (contrasting the Law and the Gospel), is because the false teachers in Corinth were emphasizing the Law in their teaching—they were mixing the two. They emphasized the Old Covenant, while the Christian ministry is the ministry of the New Covenant, (which is superior to the Old Covenant).

So what is a covenant? To use that word we need a good definition. *Covenant*: "Is an arrangement between two people or parties"; that's how Webster defines *covenant*. Charles Hodge gave another definition. "A covenant," he said, "is simply a promise suspended upon a condition."

So, when God made His covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai, (the Old Covenant), He gave Israel the Law, and He said, 'Do this and live.' 'Perfect obedience to the Law'—that was the condition. If they kept the Law, (and kept it perfectly), they would have the covenant's blessings...that was the promise.

But they failed to do it...failed miserably to do it. And over the centuries they failed to do it. It wasn't that the Law was bad, or that the Law wasn't plain. The Law is good—and God made it clear. He wrote it in stone; they could see it, they could hear it; and they could know it—but they couldn't do it. No one can, because the Law was all external. It had no inward power; it could not impart the ability to obey.

What it could do was reveal God's standard, His standard of perfection...and expose man's inability to meet that standard. That was its purpose; and that is Paul's meaning here: "The letter kills." (vs 6b). 'The letter', (the Law), written, confronts the sinner with his sin and condemns him to death for his guilt.

Salvation, eternal life, could not be obtained through the terms of the Old Covenant. So man needed a New Covenant, and that was what God promised to give. It would be different, a different covenant from the one that God made with Israel at Sinai, which was a 'bilateral' covenant and it depended on the faithfulness of both parties in order for that covenant to stand.

The New Covenant is different: It is *unilateral*; it depends on God alone. That is very clear from the promise given in Jeremiah 31, verses 31 through 34, where the New Covenant is revealed. God said, "Behold, days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." (ibid.). It would be different from the previous covenant. In the New Covenant He says, "I will put My Law within them. I will be their God. I will forgive their iniquity." (ibid.). Notice, it's all of God—He would do it: I will make, I will put, I will forgive.

And He did that, established all of that at Calvary when Christ died in our place and paid for all of our sins. That is the grace of God. And in each generation, the Holy Spirit applies it to those who believe. That's grace. It's not a *bilateral* covenant, it's a unilateral covenant. It is not a *conditional* covenant, it is an unconditional covenant.

Now someone will say, 'But there is a condition. We must believe.' Well, there's no salvation apart from faith, and we must be law abiding people; we cannot be reckless

in our behavior...and all of that is true. But for Paul, '*Faith*' is to be understood not as 'a work of the Law', but as a *response* to God's grace. It's not something that we produce. It's to be understood, as some have illustrated it, as an open hand that simply receives a gift, that receives the work of God that we can't do.

But even so, understanding faith involves the will, it involves the understanding, it involves our acting upon the promises that God gives—and so one might say, 'There is a work in that effort, is there not?'

But if that's how you want to see it, realize all of that is a gift. It doesn't originate with us. Faith, repentance, are God's work that He produces in us, and I can give you numerous examples of that—you could give me numerous examples as well, this isn't something new for any of you.

But take Philippians chapter 1, verse 29, as an example; "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake." 'Granted to suffer', that's a privilege, he's saying. But "*granted*" means, *give*. What has been *granted*? What has been *given* in that statement, "to believe in Him?" —That's faith; it has been granted.; it is a *gift*. —That's grace.

And that's the nature of the Covenant that we are in, through Christ. And those who, through faith in Christ, are joined to Christ—they're joined to His life. They're joined to His mind, His thoughts, and His desires. And we have the Holy Spirit within us to enable us to experience all of that. His life comes to us through the Spirit. His desires come to us through the Spirit, Who enables us to live His life—Who enables us to obey God.

And not just enables us, but we also do it. The Spirit gives life, and that life will be manifested in the *born again*, in the *saint*. Life is powerful. Life is not inert; it is powerful. It has an effect, and *the spiritual life* that we have through the Holy Spirit produces obedience—'law keeping'; that's grace.

And the Spirit *gives* that life through the *giving* of the Gospel, which is supernatural, life changing. —It can even change the diet of a cannibal.

In the early 19th century, missionaries brought the Gospel to the South Pacific. It was an amazing story to read about, because a great revival spread all over *Oceania*, the islands of the South Pacific, one of which was Tahiti and the islands around it, and connected with it. Later, the king of the island thanked the missionaries: "Before the Gospel", he said, "we hated, and hunted, and killed one another. Even when it came, we would not hear.", he said, "He called us, He made us hear His voice." (The king sounds like John Calvin.) Well again, that is grace, and he understood that grace.

Sailors and South Sea whalers, hated the missionaries for that. The Tahitian Islands had been their playground, a place of carnal pleasure for them. The Gospel that the missionaries brought changed all of that.

Interestingly, Charles Darwin made a good observation in his journal when he was on 'The Voyage of the Beagle' in those waters. He wrote, "While they resented the influence of the missionaries, a shipwrecked sailor finding himself marooned on an island in the South Pacific, would most certainly pray that the islanders had already received the missionaries."

'The Law kills, the Spirit gives life' through the Gospel of grace. It is supernatural. It is, "*Life-Changing Truth*"—that's what servants of the New Covenant teach. It's what Paul taught when he came to Corinth. —It is the Gospel, and it changed the Corinthians.

The false teachers robbed the Gospel of power by adding legal requirements to salvation. So Paul, who cared about the Corinthians, who had them "written in his heart", (vs2), wrote to them to correct that error by reminding them of the greatness of grace—the greatness of the power of the new life. 'Salvation is of the LORD!' (Jon 2:9).

What can be more encouraging than the knowledge that God is sovereign over all things in general, and over our lives in particular...sovereign over our salvation from beginning to end. That means our lives are secure in Him now—and for all eternity. He is

protecting and guiding us through this world—this challenging world, through difficult times. So we're always to look to Him, lean on Him, and walk by faith. That's the instruction of Proverbs chapter 3, verses 5 and 6.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart.

And do not lean on your own understanding.

In all your ways acknowledge Him

And He will make your path straight."

He is adequate; and that is where our adequacy comes from. (vs5).

And that's wisdom.

But to obey it, we have to have confidence in the LORD; we have to have confidence in His power and His wisdom. And the only God in whom we can have that kind of confidence is the God of sovereign grace. That's what Paul came preaching to the Corinthians; and it is what he defends here in 2 Corinthians. His teaching of it was proof that his ministry was 'new covenant ministry'. It was consistent with that of the prophets: That of Ezekiel and Jeremiah. The Corinthians' belief in it was proof that they were members of the New Covenant community—that they were members of, 'the society of the saved'.

And the change that God's grace produced in their lives was proof that Paul was genuine—that he was a true apostle. They were 'his letter' of commendation. His ministry, the ministry of God through him, had changed their lives. And the whole world had seen it. They were a letter, "known and read by all men," Paul said. (vs2b).

And one of the personal applications we should take from this is the importance for all of us to be ministering and to be influencing the lives of those here and around us—wherever we are. We, as Christians, possess the truth that changes lives; so let us be using it—instructing our children in grace, being an example to friends and acquaintances at work, reaching out to others as God leads.

Princeton theologian, B. B. Warfield, wrote an article entitled, *Imitating the Incarnation*, in which he explains Christ's person and ministry—how He became a man to sacrifice Himself for us. Now that's what we're to do. "Christ, our example", is how he begins, and explains that we are to sacrifice ourselves by investing our lives in the lives of others.

Toward the end, Warfield wrote, "Sacrifice means not indifference to our times and our fellows; it means absorption in them. It means not that we should live one life—but a thousand lives, binding ourselves to a thousand souls by the filaments of so loving a sympathy that their lives become ours." In other words, 'Sacrifice for one another...that's what we're to do.'

One of the converts on Tahiti told the missionaries, "Friend, you have come from a very far country. We never had such friends before." Well, that's what Paul was to the Corinthians. He'd come from a distance, and he'd come to them with the gift of life that God gives. And so we're to do the same. May God make us friends to one another here and to those we meet elsewhere.

But maybe someone here doesn't know these things. There's someone here who has not bound his or her life to Christ, who has not believed in Him, who thinks that he can please God by living by the law, rather than receiving grace—or perhaps doesn't even care about these things. —You need salvation.

We all need salvation; and there's only one way to have it and that is through Jesus Christ. He offers eternal life, forgiveness of sin. He died for sinners so that all who lay aside their own sense of merit, or their indifference and pride, would seek Him, and Him alone, and receive salvation in that way. May God help you to do that, if that's where you are.

May He help all of us become like Paul and sacrifice our time, our effort, our energy, our lives for one another.

(Closing prayer) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we praise the Triune God—God who saves. The Father, Who chose the Son, Who came to redeem; the Spirit, Who came to apply, and draw, and bring us into salvation and the family of God. We praise You for that—we thank You for that.

We thank You that we are a new creation in Christ. Father, may we live it. We have the power; we have the adequacy, may we act upon it. Strengthen our faith. Give us greater confidence in You as the sovereign God of all things—and we thank You that You are...and that You are a gracious God.

Now the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance on you and give you peace. In Christ's name, Amen.

(End of Audio)