

## **MISSIONAL METAPHORS: YOU ARE A LETTER      2 CORINTHIANS 3:1-3**

Some of you are old enough this morning to remember what it was like to write and receive letters in the mail. For many years, I used to write a weekly letter to my parents. Back in those prehistoric days, you didn't call people long distance unless it was a dire emergency and you got off the phone as quickly as you could. Towards the end of their lives I gave up writing letters to Mom and Dad in favor of the telephone despite my dad's frequent warnings about the terrible cost of long distance. It was just good to hear their voices. Now, while I realize that letter writing has become passé, you young "whipper snappers" out there do a whole lot of e-mailing, texting, Face booking and tweeting which, if you think about it, is just writing a letter in a different way.

The Bible is full of metaphors that describe followers of Jesus. Many of those metaphors point to the fact that we are called to be missional. What does that word mean: "missional"? Being missional simply means being available to point people to Jesus for salvation and transformation with your lips and your life every day and in every situation. One missional metaphor compares followers of Jesus to a letter. Let's read that Bible passage now and try to understand how it might apply to our lives.

What we just read is found in a letter itself - Paul's second letter to the Christians living in the Greek city of Corinth. Paul had started this church from scratch and then left it to start other churches. After he left, other teachers came to Corinth and began to undermine Paul. They were jealous of Paul's influence among these new followers of Jesus, so they tried to build themselves up by putting Paul down. Now, when these teachers arrived in Corinth they often brought with them actual letters of recommendation from other Christian leaders. The purpose of these letters was to assure the Corinthian Christians that so-and-so who had just arrived on the scene was a super guy and they should all listen to his teaching. We don't know who sent these letters, but apparently these letters as well as the teachers who were recommended in the letters were considered to be genuine.

Well, Paul became aware of this practice and says in effect, "I don't have any letter of recommendation to give you followers of Jesus there in Corinth. I don't see the need for it in my case. After all, it was through my preaching that you came to believe in Jesus in the first place. Come to think of it, you could say that you Corinthians are my letter of recommendation." Then, it seems that Paul realized that he'd just discovered a great, new metaphor worth developing. "Yes, that's it. You're like a living letter from Jesus Himself to a lost and dying world. When people look at your life, they should be able to 'read' what it means to know and follow Jesus. You're a letter from Jesus known and read by everybody." Let's ask and try to answer three questions that will help us understand this missional metaphor: you are a letter. Here's the first question:

### **CAN I READ THE LETTER?**

Imagine with me that you go out to your mailbox and find there a letter to you. Or, if you prefer, there you are hovering over your computer or your smart phone, and you find there an e-mail message or a text. It's addressed to you, but you don't know who it's from. There's no return address on the letter. The author of the text or the message is marked "Unknown." So, you open the letter or you open the message and see if you can, in fact, read it. You're asking the question, "Can I read this letter? Can I read this e-mail, this text, this post? Is it legible? Can I get any information from this letter that was sent to me?"

I can still recall in my letter writing days getting complaints from Mom and Dad that they had difficulty reading my handwriting. Mom would say, "It's hard to decipher your hieroglyphics!" Now, it's true that my handwriting is virtually illegible, but I blame that on my college and graduate school professors. I used to be able to write neatly. But in order to take notes of all those lectures, I learned how to write very quickly. And after you gotten used to writing quickly, its impossible to go back to writing neatly.

Here's the application. If you're a letter from Jesus - or an e-mail or a text - can other people look at your life and get interested in Jesus. Is your life legible? Does your life point to Jesus - who He is and what He's done? You evaluate someone who runs a store by her merchandise and the way she keeps her store. You judge a craftsman by the actual stuff he makes. Very few non-Christians read the Bible, so - like it or not - they're often drawn towards or pushed away from Jesus based on what they see - or read - in your life and mine. What can people read in your life? What information do they get about Jesus? About what really matters in this life? Is your life legible? Or, to put it differently, is it credible? Would anyone become curious about Jesus by looking at your life?

Billy Graham tells of a time early in his ministry when he was in a small town holding special meetings. He wanted to mail a letter, so he stopped a young boy on the street and asked him directions to the post office. After the boy told him, Billy said, "If you'll come to the Baptist church this evening, I'll be telling everyone how to get to Heaven." The boy replied, "I don't think I'll be there. You don't even know how to get to the post office!" If you claim to know how to get to Heaven, if you claim to know Jesus personally, will anyone be able to read that by how you live your life? In other words, are you credible?

Those first Christians living there in Corinth were far from perfect - believe me! But the Holy Spirit had brought about change and transformation that even the non-Christian Corinthians could plainly observe. You could read a very clear message about God's grace and power just by looking at their lives. That's why Paul says, "Clearly, you are a letter from Christ showing the result of our ministry among you...." (2 Cor 3:3 NLT) Imagine with me two secular Corinthians chatting together at the local Starbucks on a Sunday morning when they see a man they both recognize. One of them says, "Well, I wonder where he's going

today?" his friend replies, "Oh, I know. Every Sunday he meets with a group of people who call themselves Christians. You know, don't you, that he used to be a thief and drunk. He used to beat his wife and abuse their kids. You couldn't find a more useless, pathetic, worthless person on the planet. But now he's completely changed." The first man replies, "Is that so? What made him change?" The second man shrugs and shakes his head, "Well, I've heard that it all goes back to this man named Paul who came here and preached about someone named Jesus. Ever since then, that man's life has been completely changed." Before long, these two friends see a woman walking down the street that they recognize as well. "Oh, I've heard of her. She seems to be headed to the same place that man was going." His friend says, "Yes, I think you're right. Same story, you know. She used to be an immoral woman - slept around, neglected her family, had a terrible tongue. But that's all changed now." The first man asks, "How so?" His friend replies, "Same story. This man, Paul, preached about Jesus and now her life has been completely transformed."

It was obvious that those Corinthian believers were Christians. Is it obvious that you're a follower of Jesus? You can profess a faith in Jesus so quietly or so "under the radar" that a non-Christian misses it entirely. From the perspective of a non-Christian, the only difference between you and him is that you have this odd little habit of going to this building on Sundays mornings, singing some songs and having someone tells you what a 2,000 year plus book says. Let's face it. Sometimes your life and my life is not very legible. It's hard for anyone to read much about Jesus by looking at our lives. If you're a follower of Jesus today, can it be said of you, , "Clearly, you are a letter from Christ showing the result of our ministry among you..."? (2 Cor 3:3 NLT) Here's a second question:

### **WHO WROTE THE LETTER?**

Come back with me to that letter you found in the mailbox or the e-mail or text message you found on your computer or smart phone. You open it and determine if you can read it or not. Now, if the letter has no return address or the message or text is from an unknown author, don't you go to the end first and see who sent it to you? You try to figure out who sent you this message even before you dive into the letter or the message itself. Paul wants to make it clear here that the Corinthian Christians were not a letter from Paul. No, they were a letter from Christ. Yes, he (Paul) had a key role in their new life in Jesus, but Jesus was the author of the letter of their lives not Paul.

Here's the application. Your life can only have a compelling message if Jesus is the true author. Paul says, "Clearly, you are a letter from Christ showing the result of our ministry among you. This 'letter' is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts." (2 Cor 3:3 NLT) What's this about "tablets of stone"? Paul is thinking about the Ten Commandments which were written by God on literal tablets of stone and then given to Moses and the Jewish people in the Old Testament.

Originally, God gave them as wonderful and gracious guidelines that, if followed, would result in a productive and happy life. But, along the way, keeping those Ten Commandments became a legalistic observance. If you kept those ten rules - and a whole bunch of other rules - you would get into Heaven. What mattered was keeping the rules not the condition of your heart. And people today still believe much the same way. People today still believe that if you live a reasonably decent life - give to charitable causes, try hard to be moral, care about the environment, go to church (maybe, but not necessarily) - surely that's what matters to God. Surely that's a ticket into Heaven.

But that's not the good news or the Gospel, is it? Paul says that a person becomes a letter from Christ only when the Spirit of God comes into the heart of man, a woman, a teenager or a child and writes upon that heart, so to speak, a love for God and a desire to live for Him. A person runs right into something the Bible calls "grace." And that grace changes you at the very core of your being - your heart. As a result, a Christian isn't just an improved person, but a new person. A Christian isn't someone a little different than a non-Christian, but someone who is essentially different. Last week, we read this verse in this same letter, "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Cor 5:17 NLT)

Paul describes something here that's pretty profound and powerful: "...This 'letter' is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts." (2 Cor 3:3 NLT) Has anything like that ever happened to you? Has the real you - the deepest center and core of your personhood - been invaded by the Holy Spirit of God? You might well ask, "Well, how on earth can I know if the Holy Spirit has written something on my heart?" When the Holy Spirit writes on your heart, you have a whole new appreciation for how bad a thing sin is. There's a new desire for purity and to be cleansed and forgiven before God. When the Holy Spirit writes on your heart, there's a whole new appetite for God and the things of God. When the Holy Spirit writes on your heart, there's a wonderful new compassion and love for others. When the Holy Spirit writes on your heart, there's a new perspective on life and living - new values, new priorities and a new understanding of what really matters. When the Holy Spirit writes on your heart, a whole new person has come into being. Is that true of you? "Clearly, you are a letter from Christ showing the result of our ministry among you. This 'letter' is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts." (2 Cor 3:3 NLT) There's a third question to ask before we close today.

## **WHAT DOES THE LETTER SAY?**

There we are at the mailbox, or at the computer screen or gazing at our smart phone. We open the letter or the message. Yes, we can read it well enough. We look and see who sent us the letter or the message. OK, we know who it's

from now. Then we actually read it. What does it say? What's the content or information or message that's being shared with us? Here's the application. If you're a letter from Christ, what does your life say on a day by day basis? Paul tells us here that the Holy Spirit comes to live in your heart and life. When that happens others will inevitably see evidence of it. One evidence - one message - is what the Bible calls the fruit of the Holy Spirit. These are character qualities that God's Spirit works into you over time. What are they? "But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...." (Gal 5:22-23 NLT) The fact is that people who don't follow Jesus find it impossible to produce these character qualities in their own lives, because they can only be produced when the Spirit of God lives in you.

People who don't follow Jesus can produce normal human affection, but not God's kind of love. They can produce laughter and comedy, but not joy. They can produce relaxation techniques, but not peace. To press that fruit analogy just a bit, human beings without Jesus can produce a plastic apple or a wooden peach in terms of character qualities painted up to look like the real thing, but not the real, Holy Spirit produced fruit. Where will non-Christians see the real thing? In your life and mine. They'll come to see something of the beauty and grace of Jesus revealed by and in your life. They'll see something of God's compassion for others, something of Jesus' integrity in how you handle yourself, something of the Holy Spirit's power as you sort through the problems and heartaches of your own life. Non-Christians don't read the Bible; they just read you and they read me. You're a letter from Christ.

Recently, it's occurred to me that there is another very powerful message that genuine followers of Jesus inevitably convey. In other words, they just can't help give off a very definite message to other people. What message? Every person needs to be spiritually transformed and that can only happen through Jesus Christ. Jesus was all about that message and so are His followers. A true follower of Jesus is all about what Jesus was all about. We've been thinking about what it means to be missional. Again, being missional simply means being available to point people to Jesus for salvation and transformation with your lips and your life every day and in every situation. Here's a bold statement. If you're not missional, you're not a Christian. If Christianity for you is just about getting your own sins forgiven so you can go to Heaven when you die, you're not a follower of Jesus. If your life is more about staying away from lost people because they're so wrong and disgusting, you're not a follower of Jesus. If you have no interest in or desire to engage with lost people for Jesus' sake, you're not a follower of Jesus. If the Spirit lives in you, you will be missional. No choice.

What, then, was the consuming passion of Jesus? Speaking of Himself, Jesus said, "For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost." (Luke 19:10 NLT) The Bible is the story of God's mission to bring a broken, sinful world of human beings back to Himself. Jesus is the center of that mission. The entire

mission of Jesus was to point humanity towards His Father and, most importantly, to make a relationship with His Father possible for you and me by dying for our sins and being raised to life again. Quite clearly, Jesus handed off that mission to you and me - His followers. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8 NLT) What is a "witness"? Jesus says to us, "You're my letter. You're my e-mail, my text, my posting, my blog, my tweet. Your life and how you live it. Your lips as you share with others what I've done for them." Not interested? If you're not missional, you're not a Christian.

God has had to deal with me on this matter often. It's easy to become inwardly focused and make my own relationship with God the primary focus of my own life. That attitude can spill over in how we do church, too. Let me take this thought one step further. If a church isn't missional, it's not really a church. If Karl Road Baptist Church isn't all about reaching Northland, and, by extension, reaching out to lost people everywhere, we aren't really a church. A spiritual club maybe, a religious group maybe, a nice group of people maybe, but not a church. If the Spirit of God lives in you, you will be missional. If the Spirit of God is alive in this church, we will be missional. What does the letter of your life say? What does the letter of our church say?

Tara Lawton quit going to her health club in part because she sensed she didn't fit in. People always seemed to be staring at—and silently judging—her 280-pound body. Then Tara found out about Downsize Fitness, a discreet new gym in Chicago where she lives, that's designed exclusively for people who want to lose at least 50 pounds. Tara now works out five days a week and has lost 20 pounds in three months. Although people are joining health clubs in record numbers, the clubs usually feature attractive young men and women with perfect abs and toned bodies. Health clubs seem to cater mostly to fit, educated, "have it all together" clients. But according to one fitness expert, most people don't buy that picture. They know it's not realistic and don't think they can achieve it. So the fitness industry, in a way, is its own worst enemy. Unfortunately, many fitness clubs alienate the people who need the most help. But Downsize Fitness is different: they welcome extremely unfit people and then walk beside them as they work through a program to get healthy and shed pounds.

There's a parallel in that story on how to do church. Are we perceived - like most health clubs - as catering mostly (or only) to those who are already spiritually fit? Are we, unintentionally, our own worst enemy? Do we alienate the very people who need the most help? Or do we welcome - like Downsize Fitness - the spiritually unfit, the lost, the broken, the hopelessly messed up - people who may feel embarrassed to enter a church? Are we ready to walk beside spiritually unhealthy people as they pursue the path of spiritual growth? My prayer for you, for me and for our church is that increasingly, we might be able to say, "Clearly, we are a letter from Christ!"