

The Letter of Christ

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[0 : 00] We're going to continue our series that we've been looking at over the last few weeks, the benefits of Christ and today we're going to look at the letter of Christ. Friends, I presume many of you have had experience writing a CV.

In today's climate I would not find that hard to believe. You know, they're pretty curious aren't they? Name, address, education with dates which get harder to remember every year and they like to know a bit about you.

And then there's that little section called references. Personally I think that title for that section is a little bit deceitful. I think it's wrong because references doesn't really describe what's going on there. Therefore I've thought long and hard about this and I've decided we're going to take references out of CVs and this is what we're going to replace it with. If we can get this working.

People I can contact who will tell me if you're slightly exaggerating your abilities because I don't believe what you have told me is 100% accurate. I think it's quite catchy.

[1 : 09] Now really the reference section there is because people want to know why should I trust you with this job? Don't they? They want to know why should I employ you? Who will vouch for you?

Who will say what you have told me is correct? Here we have the same issue for the Corinthians in this passage we've been reading. Let's look at our first point today.

I think this one's broke, Ali, so maybe just rely on you. Remember last week, Paul's problem first of all. Remember last week we talked about how Paul had been in Corinth and he'd started this church and he'd went away for a little while and when he was away the people began to turn against him because people had risen up in the church and they had started to say, oh you don't want to listen to Paul.

You don't want to listen to him because he's not really an apostle, he's not a good guy. And what they started to do is they started to slander him. They started to say don't listen to him because he just puffs himself up.

He's just a man who's filled with his own ego and they started planting these seeds of doubt in the Corinthians mind and they started to put this question to them, why do you believe what Paul is telling you?

[2 : 23] Why do you trust this man? That's the simple question that they were getting filled with. Why trust him?

It might work now and again, well we'll see how it goes. It's been temperamental. Well these verses we're going to look at two Corinthians three. This is Paul's response to them and he wants to respond to this criticism that he's facing and he says, first of all he says you can trust me because I am a man sent from God.

You know we looked at two Corinthians two verse 17 last week. It said, unlike so many we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary in Christ we speak before God with sincerity like men sent from God.

And Paul says to them, I never peddled God's word to you. I never chiefened his word. I always told you as it was. I was always truthful with you and I spoke to you as one who was standing before God.

As God is my witness you saying I have been sincere with you. And he says I stood before you as God's messenger. Why should you trust me Corinthians?

[3 : 38] You should trust me because I am a man sent from God he says. But you know it's almost like Paul can hear what his opponents will say when they read this. He can hear them saying see he's commending himself again.

See he's bragging about himself. He's claiming to be this great man of God. And so Paul says in this very rhetorical manner in verse one here two Corinthians three. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?

Am I trying to deceive you he says by claiming a status from God? Do you think I'm trying to pull the wool over your eyes that I'm trying to profit from you? It's a rhetorical question.

He says no I'm not commending myself. He says I am defending myself. I'm defending my ministry among you. You see Paul puts no weight on that idea of building yourself up.

I think we're all probably guilty in a CV of making ourselves sound a little bit better than we really are. We like to exaggerate slightly. But Paul says later on in this letter he says in two Corinthians 10 12 and 18 he says we do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves.

[4 : 48] When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves they're not wise. It's not the one who commends himself who is approved but the one whom the Lord commends.

Paul says I don't need to commend myself to you God will do that for me. He says I will make a defence of my ministry. You want to know why you should trust me? He says I will make a defence. I am a man sent from God. And before those people in that church will twist it around he says I'm not trying to puff myself up. I'm just doing my job. I'm God's messenger.

That's who I am. He says you can trust me Corinthians because I have been sent by God to you. And that means we too have been sent to this world. Remember last week we talked about how... Or two weeks ago we talked about how we are God's missionary strategy to the world.

[5 : 46] We are God's mission to this era of time. It's in our hands. In Matthew 28 we have the Great Commission. Then Jesus came to them and said all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

We want to make disciples of all nations baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. We have this Great Commission go to this world and teach them the word of God. Make them disciples not just converts, disciples.

We are a people sent by God. But that will come with difficulties. That will come with problems as we've looked at in previous weeks.

What does Paul do? What's he going to do? The church are now questioning his status.

They said to the Corinthians now, how do you know he's a man sent by God? He claims to be that, doesn't he? They said to him, did you get references? Did you get letters of recommendation?

[6 : 52] Now back then if you wanted to go speak in a church you would usually take a letter of recommendation. You would take it from a church who's already established or an apostle and it would be your letter which would vouch for you.

You would say this person's okay, you can trust them. They said to these people in the Corinthians, don't trust Paul. Did he bring you any letters of recommendation? Does he have any references? Does he have anything to testify that he is a suitable minister for you? What does Paul say? He says, do we need like some people letters of recommendation to you or from you?

He says, do I need to bring you a letter of recommendation like those who are turning you against me did? Do you think I, Paul, need to do that? Now Paul has no issue with letters of recommendation.

If you read his letters he will recommend people to different churches. But here Paul's problem is not with the letters, it's with the attitude behind it. Because here's the thing, Paul is the one who started that church.

[7 : 55] He's the founding father of that church. Their very existence as a church is down to the fact that Paul went to them. The church is the result of the gospel he was preaching to them.

And now those who have listened to him and have formed into a church because of them look at them and say, why should we trust you?

Paul faced a pretty arrogant church here. They were turning against him. Let's go on holiday for a second in our minds. Come with me, I'm going to the Amazon, right? So let's say we're going to the Amazon because we've been told on our map there's this long lost waterfall there.

And we're flying there and it's a nice ride. We get first class as we always do in our mind. And we get there and we land and we get off the plane, we think it's hot. And somebody from there walks up and says, oh, what are you doing here?

And we say, oh, I'm going in the Amazon rainforest. I found a waterfall, I'm going to go see it. And he says, oh, it's quite dangerous to get there. Tell you what, I'll take you there. I'll show you. I know how to get there.

[8 : 57] I know where you're going. I'll lead you there. So off you go. You trek a few days and you get there and right enough, there's that waterfall. And you've taken the pictures and then the gentleman says to you, right, look.

Time's getting on. You need to get back for your plane. Come on, follow me. I'll show you which way to go. Would you turn around and say to him, well, I should have trusted you. How do you know you're going to get me back home?

Do you turn around and say to him, where are your papers to show me that you are an official guide? It's pretty arrogant, isn't it? You wouldn't turn around and do that, would you?

Paul has no external accreditation. He's not one of the 12 disciples of Jesus. He says, I've got nothing like that. I don't have letters from the church to say who I am.

You'll tell you, I had a miraculous conversion. I was converted on a road when I was travelling to a place called Damascus. He says, I can't give you any famous person's letter of recommendation that I'm a genuine apostle.

[9 : 56] But what Paul can say is, you know, I went to Corinth. And when I got to Corinth, I had a look around. And I didn't see any church there. And I didn't see any sign of anyone coming together to worship Jesus.

Corinth was a big city, friends. It was the third largest in the Roman Empire. And you know what? It was just like Edinburgh. If you read about Corinth, you can't help but see the similarities with Edinburgh. They both had this port. They were both a mass place for travelling.

It was a multicultural place. There was loads of different religions going on. And it was a political place of influence. It was a crossroads to the rest of the country. So you had thousands of people coming in and out, just like we do in Edinburgh.

Loads of tourists coming in and out. And Paul, he gets there and he had a look around. And one of his other letters to the Corinthians in chapter 6 of 1 Corinthians, he says, do not be deceived.

This is what he saw. He said, neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers would inherit the kingdom of God.

[11 : 01] And then note what he says. And that is what some of you were. Paul went to these people.

He went to all these different people. And he said, I'm a man sent from God, and I'm bringing you the gospel message. I am speaking to you as one who's speaking before God himself, as God is my witness, and I'm speaking to you in the name of Christ.

And he said, you now are a church. You have been saved from your old ways. You used to be adulterers. You used to be idolaters.

And now you come together as a church, and you say to me, why should we believe you? I don't need to give you letters of recommendations, says Paul.

Friend, we could ask that same question. Why do we trust Paul? Why do we trust what he says? Why should we listen to what he would want to write?

[12 : 00] If you take God's word to a broken people, to a lost people, to the adulterers, to the idolaters, and you're witnessing, maybe it's to your friends and your family, and you're going as a messenger of God, and if you're a Christian, that is what you are.

You are a messenger of God. And you're not peddling God's word, you're telling them the truth. God will work. Paul is the example of that.

He is the proof of that. God will work, just as he did with Paul. The background of this whole letter is the very proof of it. Why is there a church in Corinth?

Why is there a book of two Corinthians? Because Paul went to a city which had no one worshipping Jesus and took a message to them, took the gospel to them.

There's a verse in Isaiah 55. It says, As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth, I eat some possible for it to rain or snow without the earth getting wet.

[13 : 07] My word says God, that goes out from my mouth, it will not return empty to me, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. Yeah, the Christian service

can be tough, and we might face setbacks like Paul did.

But we can go in confidence that we are sent by God to this city. We are witnessing to people just like Paul did. And we can stand there as God's messengers sent to a lost city and know God will work.

We don't need to furnish them with our theological degrees. We don't need that. We just need a heart for God and a passion to proclaim His word. You don't need to go up to Him and say, I can tell you this because of XYZ, and they'll testify for me, and they'll testify for me.

You just need to simply say, I go in God's name and I will preach, I will tell my friends of the good news of Jesus, and I know God can work through that.

Paul faced a pretty big problem. But let's go on. Paul, facing that problem, has some proof he wants to share with them. Verse 2 of 2 Corinthians 3 says, You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody.

[14:28] Paul, tackling their arrogance, he wants to prove his apostleship and what they're doing is wrong, and he wants to show them what an insult it is that they're doing. And he says to them, Do you think I need a letter from you or a letter to give to others from you?

Do you think I need you to pen something down for me? Do you think I need something from you that I can put in my bag and carry around with me? You want a reason to trust me, he says.

He says, You're the reason. You're the reason you can trust me. You are my letter of recommendation. You're my reference.

How the Corinthians must have squirmed when they read this. They would realize, suddenly, oh, the one who's brought us the message of the Gospel, the one who brought us the good news of Jesus, we've now turned against and said, Why can we trust you?

Paul says to them, I don't need any paper trail from you. I don't need any paper trail to give to you, because you're my letter. Not some human document.

[15:28] Every time someone wants proof of my ministry, he says, I'm sending them to you. You testify, Corinthian church, of my ministry. You testify that I came to you as a man sent from God.

Have you forgotten this? But you know what's most amazing here is Paul doesn't say to them, oh, shame on you. Which I think, you know, if that was me, I probably would have said, oh, you're a terrible bunch, you know.

I said, I can't believe you said that to me. But Paul doesn't say that. Paul says, no, you are a letter of recommendation. Nobody says in verse two, you are written on our hearts.

That's a very personal thing to say. Paul's saying, you're not just a piece of paper, which can be lost, which can be misplaced, which can be damaged by water.

He says, you are in my heart. Now when something is truly believed or relied upon, we say it's of our heart, don't we? The Bible speaks of this, when we ground ourselves in something, it is always said to be in our heart.

[16:34] When a good man, in Luke 6.45, it says, the good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart. And the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart.

For out of the overflow of his heart, his mouth speaks. When something's written in our hearts, it shapes us, doesn't it? It defines us. When the Bible says that God's law is written in our hearts, that defines what we do.

If we're convicted about something, if we're passionate about something, we say, oh, that's really laid on that person's heart. Because the heart is the motivation for action, isn't it? Do you think about it?

Do you ever turn to your wife or your husband now, fiancing at that and say, I love you with my whole right forearm? No. You don't ever say, I love you with my right foot. You say, I love you with my heart.

Because that expresses what's truly about us. That expresses what we principally are, or we believe, or we think. Paul says, you people are turning against me. He says, you are the people who are in my heart.

[17:36] Even though you're rebelling against me, when I think back to my time of my ministry with you, the fellowship we share together, he says, you are a people forever close to me, forever in my heart.

Paul is speaking here of the love any minister has with his congregation. You know, I did a quick email around this week. I wanted to ask them, friends and people who are ministers, and I emailed

them, I said to them, could you tell me where you went on your placement as a student? Now for some of them, that was 30, 40 years ago. And straight away, every single one of them said to me, I went to such and such a place, and you would never believe the people they were, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and they say, and then I went to this place, and the people they were, every single one of them had this deep affection for those they'd been ministering to. And friends, I feel the same way. You have a deep affection in my heart, no matter where I am in the world, when I think about my life in a ministry, you are part of that. But it goes one step further. It doesn't just go from person up the front to the people in the pews, this goes for you personally in your lives as well. As a Christian, when you think about your life as a Christian, you're going to think about the people you have witnessed you, you're going to think about the people that you have tried to share God's word with.

[18 : 56] And these people will be very special to you. Paul says, if I ever needed proof of my ministry, I need only think of you, my dear Corinthians.

I think of who you were, and who you now are. You were adulterers, you were adulterers, and all the rest of it, he says, but now you are saved. Paul defends his ministry here by saying, you Corinthians, you're my letter of recommendation. But know what he says here as well, in verse 2, he says, you are my letter, but you're known and read by everybody.

He's saying, every time someone comes to Corinth and sees you, you are an evidence which they can see of a successful missionary endeavour. It's plain to see that my ministry among you is a success.

It's plain to see that you are genuinely saved by Jesus Christ. When the world looked at the current church, they saw the gospel of Jesus had taken root.

[20 : 04] They saw that the gospel had been preached to them. You know, the church has a checkered past. We have done things in the name of the church which have been wrong in history.

But what does Edinburgh see when it looks at us? What does the world see when it looks at us now? Are we a witness to the world around us? Are we known and read by everybody? Do they see us and say there's something different about that church? Do they look at us and say that's a people who love Jesus?

You know, if we want to be that kind of church, we have to reflect Jesus in our personal lives. Because when you do that, you shine like a star in a crooked generation.

You know, in Proverbs 4, 18, Proverbs says, The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.

[21 : 01] What's getting as if you love Jesus, and if you are living out your love for Him, then you will shine like the sun coming up in the morning. You will be evident to everyone.

When you do this, the world will look at you and know there's something different about that person. When Jesus works in you, the world will stop and take notice.

Devil might try to turn people against us, but the proof cannot be covered up. Did you know 90% of the people who went forward during the Billy Graham Crusades testified that they had been influenced by seeing someone they knew living out their love for Jesus?

Friends, we need to be a letter to this world. We need to be the evidence to this world that Jesus is working, that we are the fruits of a successful mission, God's mission to this world.

Paul says, you are my proof Corinthians. Can we say, Derek, you are my proof? More so can we say, God, you are my proof to this world, but you still say and you still care.

[22 : 17] Let's go on to our last point. Last point is Paul's praise. We pick up in verse 3. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

First of all, Paul says, you show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry. Now, up until this point, Paul has been very assertive, my ministry is from God. You are the result of my ministry, and it's been a success.

The world can see that, but now he wants to remind them why they are a successful story. Here, Paul is not seeking to exalt himself. He's not saying, look at what a great job I've done.

He says, you are a letter, but you're not my letter. You are Christ's letter. He says, I'm not the author of your faith. I'm not the one who's done it.

Jesus has done it. He says, I'm just describing, I'm just writing down what he said, so he's saying, I'm just preaching the words to you which Jesus has given me. Do you remember we looked at this verse last week, 2 Corinthians 5.20, we are there for Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.

[23 : 31] We implore you on Christ's behalf, and we reconcile to God. Paul is saying, Jesus has used him to go to the people in Corinth, and he has used him to tell them the gospel.

And because of that, this church has formed. And Paul says, my ministry is a success, but it's not my success, it's God's success.

Jesus has written your salvation, he says. He says, you are a letter of Christ, and you are written not with ink, he says, but with the spirit of the living God.

You're not a mere document written with ink, which is of this world, anyone can write with ink. He's saying, you have been written by the hand of God. You've been written with God's spirit, only God can write with that.

And Paul is saying here, God has worked in your life. That's why you're evident to everyone. That's why you're a letter which is read by everyone. That's why you're the proof of my ministry, because God has worked within you.

[24 : 32] Paul can say, I'm a man sent from God, and I came to you with the power of God, but he'll say, I'm just the messenger. Look at this verse together. He says in 1 Corinthians 2, 4 and 5, my message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the spirit's power, with God's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. Paul's saying, don't ground your faith.

Don't ground the fact that you're a church in what I have done for you. Ground it on what Jesus has done for you in your life. Honor Him, not me.

Paul says, I'm just the servant. Paul now wants to build on this, and he's building on this picture saying, as you know, we looked at last week that we're in this triumphal procession where God's missionary to the world, and that when we take God's word, we can be successful, because God will use us.

And he says to them, you're not on tablets of stone, he says. He says, you're not written on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts. Now, what Paul is wanting to do here is, he's wanting to show the Corinthians how excellent their salvation is.

So he says that your salvation is not written on tablets of stone. Here he's going back to the Old Testament, to the Ten Commandments. God gave Moses two tablets of stone, and with His own finger He wrote the law on them.

[26 : 01] And Moses took them down from Mount Sinai and gave them to the people. And he said, this is what God expects from you. You're in a covenant with God, you're in a relationship with God. This is what He expects from you.

But when the people got the law, they soon began to realize, I can't keep this law. I'm not good enough at keeping this law. In fact, God's requirement for them was be holy as I am holy. And the law was to reflect that. And the people got it and they said, I really am not going to be able to do this. I'm falling short. But the law was there to tell people, yeah, you can't do it on your own. The law was there to tell people, by yourself you're not going to be able to do it. But the law said, pointed, the law pointed, to the one who could do it for you. God spoke of a time when He would come again and He would take this law and He would supersede it and He would bring something better.

In Jeremiah 31, 31 and 33, He says, the time is coming to clear the Lord when I'll make a new covenant. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. Not on the stone we're talking about.

[27 : 07] He says, I will be their God and they will be my people. God was talking about Jesus coming and fulfilling the law for us. Making a new covenant with us.

A covenant of grace by whereby we can go to him and say, Jesus, I can't keep the law. I can't merit my salvation. I can't be good enough. I can't be holy.

And God says, it's okay. I'll keep the covenant for you. I'll take your sin for you. I will present you before God is holy.

Now Paul says, you have that work written in your hearts. You have that work defining you. We are changed from within.

Jesus doesn't want you to be some old stone tablet. People look at him. He says, I will work within your heart and make you a whole new person so that you can be in a relationship with me.

[28 : 10] Paul faced a huge problem in Corinth. They wanted evidence. They wanted proof. They wanted his references. And he says, I brought you the word and Jesus worked through. Jesus saved you from your sin.

And now he says, you are the letter to the world. You are proof that Jesus works in people's lives. Paul was asked for proof of his ministry.

But he says, your salvation is the proof. It's clear to everyone who sees you. Friends, if you were asked for references today for your own ministry, who could you give?

One day you will look back in your life and your time as a Christian and you will think about that thought that I was to be a witness to this world. Who will you behold in dear in your heart?

We are the new Paul to Corinth. We are the new Paul. We have to go out to Edinburgh. We have to share with them the gospel so that Jesus will work in them through what we do.

[29 : 20] We have to have a heart for the lost like Paul did. And when you go out and you do this, one day you'll look back and you will know God worked through me.

God used me. And I hold in my heart dear to me all those who have been saved, not by my effort, but because Jesus used me.

Because Jesus wanted them to know how great his salvation is for them. Friends, we are to be a letter to this world. We are to be there for Edinburgh and for wherever we may live.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word, Lord. We thank you, Lord, that in Paul we have the example of you working, that as he took the message to a lost people, you worked through that, Lord.

We thank you for that example and we know, Lord, from it that we too can take a message, your message, to a lost world, a lost city. And Lord, we stand confident that you will work through it, that you will bless our efforts, Lord.

[30 : 35] And Father, we pray that all glory be given to you and that, Lord, we will be able to look back in our life and know that you have worked through us, as you did through Paul.

In Jesus' name, we praise you and we honour you for the salvation you have given us, for fulfilling the law for us, Lord, because we couldn't do it by ourselves. We ask and pray these things to you, Lord, in Jesus' name, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Amen.