

I. Read II Corinthians 3:1-5

- A. In verses 1-3 the Apostle Paul refers to “letters of commendation” (NAS). The commentators of the *New Geneva Study Bible* explain that “apparently Paul’s opponents had brought some misleading letters of commendation to the church at Corinth, letters that the bearers were not worthy of.” By contrast, Paul refers to the Corinthian believers as “epistle(s) of Christ,” and consequently as his “letters of commendation” (NAS). Paul viewed the faith and witness of the Corinthians as the fruit of his ministry. Read Matthew 7:17-20 and discuss the truth that men may be known by their fruits. Relate this truth to Paul’s ministry in Corinth.

In Matthew 7:17, a very clear statement of fact is made—“...every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit.” The point is that there are consequences for our attitudes, actions, and words. If we consider a fruit-bearing tree, we recognize that not every part of the tree is beneficial to others — for example, its bark, leaves, branches, roots, etc. Yet the fruit which is produced *is* beneficial to others. In the same way, Paul was not declaring himself to be perfect, but rather he was pointing to the result or fruit of his ministry and life — the church in Corinth.

All professing Christians will produce fruit of some kind and, according to Matthew, this fruit will reveal their true nature. Some men produce a bitter fruit — dissension, factionalism, backbiting, immoral behavior, the waste of time and other resources, and legalism. Others produce good fruit which can be seen and appreciated in the church and the Kingdom of God.

Each of us should continually evaluate the fruit we are producing and make necessary changes and adjustments. Those who produce a life-long pattern of bad fruit are not saved (“the bad tree bears bad fruit”).

- B. In II Corinthians 3:3, Paul states that the Corinthian believers “are a letter of Christ.” The idea that believers are a sort of *living epistle* to the grace of God is a powerful one. Discuss this statement: “*If you are a Christian, you may be the only gospel the unbeliever ever hears,*” keeping in mind what Paul said in verse 3.

Many unbelievers will not attend church or a bible study. Their only exposure to the gospel of Christ may be the demonstration of God’s grace, which should be evident in a believer’s life. In other words, the lost co-worker or neighbor can see the *effect* of our faith in Christ through our attitude, behavior, and words. If what they see does not reflect the grace and character of Christ, why should they be interested in listening to our gospel witness? The truth of the gospel is spoken with great eloquence as believers manifest the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). Likewise, the hypocrisy of many professing believers is communicated as they manifest the fruit of their unregenerate hearts (Gal. 5:19-21).

This does not mean that sharing the gospel message is unnecessary if we simply live godly lives. As the unbeliever observes godly character in the believer, he will be more apt to listen to the gospel. Men are saved finally by believing the gospel of Christ (see I Corinthians 15:3-4), not by good impressions made by Christians.

- C. Paul refers to the cause behind the believer’s sanctification in II Corinthians 3:3-5. From verse 3, it is clear that the Corinthian believers were saved and are being sanctified by:
the Spirit of the living God

Note to Leaders:

“Written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God.” The Greek text shows that the word written is in the perfect tense, which points to an action in the past that has

consequences for the present. This action took place when Paul first brought the gospel to the Corinthians (Acts 18:1-5).

Although Paul mentions ink but not paper, he is not carelessly expressing himself. He presents the concept of writing a letter but states that the process of writing was not by ordinary means of paper and ink. The letter instead is a spiritual epistle written with the Holy Spirit. Christ is the author of the letter, the Spirit is the facilitator of life, and God is the source of life. Human writing can fade and disappear, but divine writing is permanent, alive, and life-giving. The phrase living God recurs in both Old and New Testaments and points to God, who gives life.” (Simon J. Kistemaker, II Corinthians)

Read Philippians 1:6 and comment on how it supports the answer above.

It is the Holy Spirit who initiated our salvation through the *effectual call* and *regeneration*, and it is the Holy Spirit who continues that work in *sanctification*, who sustains it through the believer’s *perseverance*, and who one day will complete the work in *glorification*.

Note to teachers: It may be helpful here to review the ordo salutis for your class: Universal Call, Effectual Call, Regeneration, Faith & Repentance, Justification, Adoption, Sanctification, Perseverance of the Saints, and Glorification

Does the truth expressed above negate the work and value of Paul’s ministry to the Corinthians?

No. Paul clearly declares that the Corinthians were “cared for by us” (NAS). That means that Paul’s labor in Corinth was used by God to accomplish the work of salvation in the lives of the Corinthians. Yet, even Paul’s own salvation and spiritual gifts were gifts of God’s grace. The spiritual gifts Paul possessed were given to him by God. Thus, ultimately it is God alone who deserves the glory for the good that occurs in the life of the believer and in the church collectively. It is important to understand that God calls men and women to serve in the church. He calls men and gifts them with particular spiritual gifts that give them the capability to equip the saints (Eph. 4:12). Recognizing this biblical truth in no way diminishes God’s role as the source of all grace.

- D. In verse 4, Paul writes that his “confidence” is “through Christ toward God” (NAS). What do you suppose he means?

His statement undoubtedly means many things. At the personal level, Paul was affirming that his own salvation and redemption was based upon his faith in Christ alone. Further, his confidence that his faith would be sustained was in Christ alone. Further yet, Paul’s expectation that his ministry would be effective was because of Christ rather than because of his own abilities.

“Jesus brought Paul to conversion (Acts 9:4-6), called him to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15), repeatedly encouraged him to proclaim the Word (Acts 18:9-10; 22:18, 21; 23:11), and constantly fulfilled his promises to him. Thus Paul fully trusted Jesus because he knew that God is true.” (Kistemaker)

Paul also recognized the spiritual dangers and centrifugal forces facing the church in Corinth. His recognition would have resulted in personal discouragement if he did not know Christ in His fullness and trust in the sovereignty of God. He knew that as much as he loved the church, Christ loved it still more. Christ Himself would sustain the church in Corinth, notwithstanding the challenges they faced.

- E. What does Paul mean in verse 5 when he writes, “Not that we are adequate (NAS) (sufficient – KJV; competent – NIV) in ourselves?”

He is reiterating the point he has been making by calling the reader’s attention to God being the source of all aspects of salvation or redemption. Paul understood that apart from God he could accomplish nothing lasting in his ministry. All genuine ministers of the gospel come to

the place in which they recognize that they may be able to elicit or engender temporary responses from and in people, but that lasting and substantial change only comes from God. Emotional commitments never last, but God the Holy Spirit is able to bring lasting change in the lives and hearts of believers.

What are the practical (functional) implications for the last part of verse 5 — “our adequacy (NAS) or competence (NIV) is from God?” (Read 1 Corinthians 12:1, 4-7; Romans 12:3-8.)

God gives spiritual gifts to individuals which enable ministry and service within and to the Body of Christ. He also *sanctifies* abilities we may already possess for the benefit of the church. Spiritual gifts ought to be discovered, developed, and affirmed by the Church. For example, a man feeling he is called to the ministry will have an internal sense of calling, an affirmation by the church as fruit is manifested and the endorsement of a court of the church (the session or presbytery).