

“Ministers with Confidence”

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

Evan Godbold

June 27, 2021

Introduction:

Great to be with you this morning in this role. I am excited to get into the Word with you this morning and grateful for the opportunity to dig into it together. I wanna pray again for our time, and then we'll dive right in.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father,

You are holy. You are worthy. You alone are God and Lord. We are blessed today to gather together with open Bibles to hear from you as a family. I pray that you would also open our hearts this day to hear from Your Word exactly what you would have us hear so that we might glorify you with our lives as we head into this week. Thank you for the privilege to be here opening the text today together. Help me to say only what you would have me say.

*In the name of Christ Jesus, we pray,
Amen.*

Opening Illustration:

Before we open our text today though, I want to talk to you about letters of recommendation. If I could get a show of hands,

- How many of you have ever had to write a letter of recommendation or a reference for someone else?
- How many have ever had to ask someone to write a reference letter or letter of recommendation on your behalf?
- How many of you have had to read letters of recommendation or reference letters for someone else?

Most of us, have probably been in one or two or maybe all three of those scenarios. Letters or recommendation in our culture still play an important role in some of the more formal elements of our culture, in particular things

like finding employment or authenticating someone's credentials to an outside group.

I was wracking my brain to think of a personal illustration about letters of recommendation that could help serve us in our opening this morning—and I really didn't have anything compelling. But since one of our Teaching Elders recently demonstrated that it is right and good to show clips from 1980s films about time travel in order to help us better understand the scriptures, who am I to do anything except say, "Amen!" And join him.

So, I thought about letters, and I remembered the iconic 1980s trilogy *Back to the Future*. In *Back to the Future*, the main character, high school senior, Marty McFly (played by Michael J. Fox) is good friends (for some reason) with a nuclear physicist named Doc Brown (played brilliantly by Christopher Lloyd) who has invented a time machine. Marty accidentally travels back in time 30 years into the past and must convince the younger 1955 version of Doc to help him power the time machine and send Marty "Back to the Future" (1985), which [spoilers] he does. But through a series of misadventures that comprise the plot of the second film *Back to the Future Part II*, Marty ends up stranded again in 1955 at the close of that film while the 1985 version of Doc is actually stranded 70 years further in the past in 1885.

So once again, Marty has to convince the Doc from 1955 to help him, but the problem is, from this Doc's perspective, he has literally just finished helping the first time and so Doc sort of freaks out that Marty is back again, seemingly immediately after the events of the first film. But there's a great, short scene where Marty is able to convince Doc of all that has transpired and get his help again, and I wanna play that for you this morning.

[Clip]

So, the thing that calms Doc down during his brilliant portrayed panic, is a letter. Marty has a letter from Doc's future self that explains the situation. It illustrates how powerful of an authenticator a letter can be. It's almost a letter of recommendation. Now, it's clearly a letter to Marty first and foremost, but it's also a letter for his 1955 counterpart because it contains

instructions on how to repair the time machine so that Marty can get home. And Doc can recognize his own handwriting, his own design drawings and schematics. It is, in a sense, Doc's reference letter to himself, held in trust by Western Union for 70 years, confirming and authenticating Marty's reason for existing again in 1955. And once they have it, they know how to act and what needs to be done.

In our text today, the Apostle Paul is going to discuss letters of recommendation as it relates to his ministry and the ministry of others. And it helps us to understand, not unlike Back to the Future III, letters of recommendation in the first century could be seen as powerful authenticators of a person's credentials or authority.

So, if you would, open your Bible's with me to our text this morning, **2 Corinthians 3:1-6**. We are going to read the text in its entirety and then we'll begin to look at in smaller chunks together.

¹Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? ²You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. ³And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered 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. ⁴Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. ⁵Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, ⁶who has made us sufficient to be ministers 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

Verse 1 –

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?

We have this rhetorical question right off the bat with two important words “commend” and “again.”

The word in Greek translated here as “commend” here can mean quite a few things, but context easily tells us that Paul is using it here to convey the meaning of *providing evidence of a personal characteristic or a claim through action*. So, “**commending**” means just what we talked about—it’s an authentication of one’s intentions or qualifications, but in this case, by pointing out past actions or deeds. And Paul says, “Ourselves” because, you may remember, it’s not just Paul but also Timothy as a co-author, but it is also just the rhetorical convention. These feelings are about Paul specifically, so even though he says “we” at certain points, it’s clear throughout that this is deeply personal for Paul.

Why would he bring this up? This idea of commending himself? Well, look at what has he been doing for the bulk of chapter one and two? He has in fact given a lengthy recount of his experiences, actions, decisions, and motives to the Corinthian church.

- The affliction he experienced in Asia (1:8)
- Wanting to come to them first on the way to Macedonia as well as on the way back (1:15-16)
- Talking about not wanting to make another “painful visit” to Corinth (2:1)
- His grief for Titus and the Corinthians when he was at Troas (2:12-13)

So, when he asks the question, “*Are we beginning to commend ourselves?*” He is looking back on all the information he is giving them saying, “Are we trying to prove ourselves to you by giving you all this info?”

But then there is the second word—“**again.**” “*Are we beginning to commend ourselves **again?***” Why does Paul say “again”? Has he done this before?

Well, we know that contextually, Paul has immediately before this just drawn a distinction between himself and others at Corinth that seek to be in authority. These are the hucksters & charlatans David told us about two weeks ago as he nearly broke out into a routine from Oklahoma.

¹⁷ For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

2 Corinthians 2:17

So, these “peddlers of God’s word,” these false teachers, are likely attempting to draw a distinction between their ministry and Paul’s. And one of the criticisms they are lobbing at Paul is that he is constantly commending himself—constantly justifying his actions.

So, the use of “again” here would imply that this is not a new criticism—Paul’s been accused by some of being too boastful. One commentator even suggests that Paul’s own mention of it perhaps “betrays his touchiness about the subject.” He wants to check any possible criticism that he might be reverting to his so-called penchant to vaunt his own authority.

Now, what specifically the charge of “again” is referring to is not known. There is, after all, a lot of communication between Paul and Corinth that we no longer have any record of. The Earliest letter, the severe letter, the painful visit—all things we’ve heard about but don’t know the exact context of.

But you can imagine even just looking back on 1 Corinthians, Paul’s previous letter that we *do* have, that perhaps Paul’s critics in Corinth were parsing Paul’s past words in bad faith in order to use them against him.

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? ² If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

³ This is my defense to those who would examine me.

1 Corinthians 9:1-3

It is at least conceivable, that a passage such as this, out of context might very easily be turned against Paul as sounding boastful. Whatever the case, Paul is quick to get out ahead of any more of the same criticism.

Paul asks a second rhetorical question to follow up his first. ***Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?***

Paul again brings his opponents briefly into view. Unlike “some,” he does not need letters to or from the Corinthian church. **Again, just as in 2:17, the “many” who are peddlers of God’s Word, are represented here again as “some” who need letters of recommendation.**

Now remember, we just talked about letters of recommendation in our culture and in the world of Back to the Future, but it is probably appropriate here to think a bit about it in the Ancient Near East at the time of the New Testament.

Letters of introduction or recommendation were exceedingly common in Paul’s era. Arguably, both Philemon and 3rd John can be placed fully in this category. It also appears that Paul normally made it a practice of including his recommendations in his letters with broader purposes, particularly at the end, often specifically naming people. Philippians, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Thessalonians. But there’s one specific instance I’ll highlight and that comes from Romans 16.

‘I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, ²that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.

Romans 16:1-2

That’s the same “commend” that Paul uses. So we see it in Paul’s general epistles. But specific, Letters of recommendation followed the same stylistic conventions in regard to opening, closing, and salutations as other types of ancient Greek epistles. *And* it was standard practice for the one being recommended to also deliver the letter—such as in the case of Philemon, where Onesimus is the both subject of the letter *and* the courier.

These sorts of letters reflect social customs of the day. Normally the letter was of a general nature—requesting help, hospitality, employment, or instruction for the letter’s courier. Sometimes, a letter of recommendation was written for someone that the recipient already knew, and thus there is

not a complete overlap between the letter of recommendation and the letter of introduction, again, like Philemon. Other times, they served to introduce a stranger to the recipient that was known only by the author.

Think about it. You couldn't just google someone, right? Someone says they're from somewhere, you have to take them at their word. And people could and did take advantage of that. When people traveled far beyond their own hometowns, they were much less likely to be received by strangers, so people relied on trusted relationships. And if you did travel somewhere new, you might not know anyone in town. A letter from somebody well-known in that town could help you. It's really not unlike Marty stuck in 1955 with his letter from Doc. Considerable weight would've been given if you could get organizations or officials in the social circles you traveled in to endorse you. Churches were no different.

So, being that Paul's opponents needed such letters in order to be introduced to the Corinthian Christians surely means that they were not from Corinth or the surrounding region of Achaia, but elsewhere in the fledgling early Church. It also perhaps points to the derivative, fraudulent nature of their authority and speaks against the idea that they had any recognized association with any of Paul's other congregations.

Whoever these people were, they weren't connected with Paul or the other Apostles. Yet, we know from later on in Chapter 11:13 that they were in fact calling themselves Apostles.

And since such letters were often requesting patronage or financial assistance of some kind, it is likely that Paul's opponents came to Corinth with letters requesting support and admittance to the congregation as teachers. In other words, as soon as they arrived in the city, they attempted to plug into the church hierarchy.

Furthermore, Paul speaks of letters not only to the church but also **from the church in Corinth**.

Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? Theologian and Commentator Charles Hodge put it this way:

These false teachers had no doubt gained access to Corinth on the strength of certain letters of recommendation. They were so little known and had so little character, that when they went elsewhere, they would need to be commended by the Corinthians. With Paul the case was different.

--Charles Hodge

Not only did these bogus apostles need the legitimacy of the Corinthians if they wanted to go elsewhere, Paul is pointing out to the Corinthians that it is sort of rich that they now regard *themselves* as sufficient to judge the legitimacy of anyone who claims to be an apostle, given that *he* was the one who initially told them about Jesus! We actually know this story from back in Acts 18.

¹ After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

⁸ Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. ⁹ And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.” ¹¹ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

“Do I need a letter to you or from you?” actually cuts deep! Paul, the very one who brought the gospel to Corinth and spent over a year and a half planting the church there, is now saying, “How do I get you to listen to me? Maybe I need a letter from Antioch? Jerusalem? What about you? Maybe I should just get you to write me a letter.”

But then we get to verse 2.

² You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.

Verse 2 answers his rhetorical questions from the previous. Paul says pointedly to the Corinthians: ***“I don’t need a letter! YOU are my letter! I don’t need to commend myself. My love for you does that. It’s written on my heart!”***

As we mentioned, it was customary for a letter of recommendation to be about the letter bearer. The letter Paul refers to is about himself and the authenticity of his ministry, and he carries it in his heart.

The spiritual transformation of the Corinthians was endorsement enough for Paul. He remembered the sweetness of that eighteen months, daily living with them, admonishing them, shepherding them in gospel. Their very lives were spiritual letters, written by the Spirit on the tablet of Paul’s heart.

And he’s like, “It’s clear! It’s plain. Anyone can read it! It’s meant to be known by all!” How? “I’ll tell them!”

There difference between a piece of papyrus and years and years of love and commitment. Much like he could say to the church in Thessalonica, “I shared not just the gospel with you but my very life!” **And he continues in verse 3**

³ And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered 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.

Paul elaborates on this spiritual letter that the Corinthians are to him. And there are four characteristics this letter has that makes it superior than any human letter.

1. **This letter is written by Christ.** Paul’s opponents may have letters, but these letters have a human author. Since the Corinthians are his letter and they were created in Christ, Paul has a letter written by the highest authority.

2. **This letter is related to Paul's ministry.** The phrase is translated as the ESV as "delivered by us." But it could also be translated as ministered
3. **This letter was inscribed by the Spirit.** The author was Christ, but the means was the Spirit of the Living God.
4. **This letter was written on hearts.** The Lord uses His Spirit to write on hearts.

Paul draws a contrast between fleshy hearts and stone tablets. Papyrus or parchment and ink would seem to be a more appropriate comparison at this point, since letters of recommendation wouldn't really have been etched in stone. But Paul chooses stones because he will draw a comparison between his ministry for Christ and Moses' ministry for the law. We'll hear a little bit more on that in a minute but the bulk of that discussion will be saved for later on in this chapter. Stay tuned for that next week!

What we can say about that for now is that Paul is showing the Corinthians who has the superior letter. Earthly letters are temporary. Spiritual letters are lasting. Hearts are eternal. **And then he says this:**

⁴ Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.

This sort of statement can sometimes feel out of left field. He's got this rich spiritual metaphor that he's developed about letters and not commending himself. And then he starts talking about **confidence**.

What's the connection?

Well, basically, Paul is saying that the Spirit's work in his ministry justifies and explains his confidence as an apostle. It's not some sort of self-confidence based on his own abilities and strengths or on the acclaim of others who underwrite his religious authority.

Who is the confidence through? Christ. And who is toward? God.

His confidence is based on his calling through Christ; but Paul is not even worried about other people. If ever we were to lack confidence, it would be

before a holy God. But he says he has confidence through Christ toward God. **This is essentially an answer to his question in 2:16 – “Who is sufficient for these things?”**

Christ is!

Paul says this explicitly in verse 5.

⁵ Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God,

Paul knows that he has confidence. He's not denying it. But his confidence is not from human affirmations or credentials or certifications. Paul, the Hebrew of Hebrews, Pharisee of Pharisees, rejects any accolades that might advance his cause. His confidence is not from human letters; it's from the Spirit of God in Christ Jesus.

Who is sufficient for these things? To be ambassadors bringing the fragrance of the knowledge of Jesus Christ everywhere? Paul asks in 2:16. And he answers here. No one. None... but Jesus himself. The very one who leads in triumphal procession.

He makes us sufficient, because apart from him we never could be.

Verse 6

⁶ who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Now this is an interesting verse, and it's because we're encountering some familiar phrasing here. These false apostles come with letters of recommendation. Paul says he doesn't need letters because the Corinthians themselves are his letter. And that letter is written on hearts by Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

Now Paul is talking about being made sufficient by God to be ministers of a new covenant—not of the... *letter*... but of the Spirit. Now obviously here, Paul isn't really talking about letters of recommendation anymore.

He's talking about the Law. More specifically, the old Covenant under the Law. Paul and Timothy are ministers of a new covenant.

But what does Paul mean when he says "the letter kills but the Spirit gives life"?

One commentator noted that this phrase has been subject to all sorts so-called of hermeneutical gerrymandering.

So, let's try and clear it up.

- Paul is certainly not talking about a spiritual reading of the OT as opposed to a literal or legalistic reading.
- Paul is also not talking about the Old Testament but the Old *Covenant*, specifically the Mosaic covenant. As we will see next week, Lord willing, he is thinking especially of the Mt. Sinai revelation in stone, the Ten Commandments. That connects back to his metaphor – "tablets of stone" in verse 3.

Paul is not one who administers and applies the Mosaic law, not even the Ten Commandments. He is rather a minister who both proclaims and dispenses the Holy Spirit.

The ministry of the letter, that is, the Law, kills unrepentant sinful people while the ministry of the Spirit gives them life (this is Paul's thrust in Romans 6–7). **In Galatians 3:10, Paul describes those trying to live righteously under the law as cursed because they are doomed to fail.**

Paul's argument here concerns the effect of the two covenants on fallen people, not on their purposes. We know from elsewhere, that Paul is convinced that the OT Law was a true revelation of God and that it came attended with glory

⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.

Romans 9:4

His point is that its day has passed, and its glory has been surpassed in every way by the exceeding and superseding glory of the New Covenant—

the Person and Work of Jesus. The essential problem with the Law is that it *cannot* give life. Only the Spirit of God through the atoning work of Jesus, the God man can do that.

Application:

So, what are we to make of all of this. There are some glorious, challenging truths to be seen here.

From six verses, I've pulled three questions that, I think, point to the truths we're after today. And I am going to phrase them as questions because they really are important for self-examination. But, I will say up front, questions one and two are going to have the same answer for the bulk of us in here. But question three will be unique to you.

1. What is your calling?

What are you called to do? I don't mean specifically or uniquely. I'm not talking about if you're called to step up and serve somewhere new or if you are supposed to apply for that promotion or anything like that. What is your life's calling, if you believe in Jesus?

If you're trying to be cute you might say, "I know! I'm called to glorify Jesus Christ by making mature disciples to reach the nations!" Or if you want extra credit and you went to one of our meetings this last week, you might say, "I'm called to Learn, Live, and Lead!"

Sure, but if we boil all that down, what are we saying? Or better yet what is Paul saying you are called to do.

You are called to be ministers. You are called to be ministers of the New Covenant.

God has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant. That's what Paul says in verse 6. And you may say, "Now wait a minute, Evan. You said even though Paul says "we" and "us" throughout, he's really talking about himself. Isn't that true here too?

Yes... and no. One thing specifically gives away that this is in fact a general call to all who know Jesus. First and most importantly, is the word Paul chooses to use. He uses the Greek word *diakonos*, which is where we get our word “Deacon,” and it is true elsewhere that it is translated as “deacons.” But it is rightly translated simply as “**ministers**” here. And it is essentially a broad term that does not refer to a professional class of clergy or priests.

So why doesn’t he use the term “Apostle” if he is defending his credentials? ... Because he’s not! Remember?? That’s the whole point. Paul is not puffing himself up. He is saying he’s utterly insufficient to be anything else but a humble servant (another meaning of *diakonos*) of the New Covenant of Christ Jesus.

Whereas “apostle” refers to Paul’s authoritative office, “minister” refers to his function of mediating God’s presence and word, a role he can share with non-apostles, like us.

We are *all* ministers—servants of Christ and his New Covenant of Grace through Faith. You don’t get to leave it to the professionals, you must think of yourself as just as called as me or David or the Elders, or the staff.

It’s our job equip *you*, the saints, for the work of ministry Ephesians 4:12 says. If you are doing the work the work of ministry, then what are you? *You’re a minister!*

2. Where is your confidence?

Paul’s opponents accused him of being overconfident—of commending himself. But where did Paul’s confidence actually stem from? As a Minister of the New Covenant, it came from Christ himself—the only place it could come from!

This Hebrew of Hebrews—this Pharisee of Pharisee’s also said this in his letter first letter to Timothy:

¹⁵ This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”—and I am the worst of

them. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, so that in me, the worst of them, Christ Jesus might demonstrate his extraordinary patience as an example to those who would believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷ Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

1 Timothy 1:15-17 CSB

Where is the confidence going? Where is the honor going? Is it some piece of paper? Some sort of letter of recommendation? No! It is Christ himself!

How can we be sufficient for these things?! We can't! It's through Christ alone that we can do this. And even then, when we tell others about him, we imitate the example of Paul, and we say, "I am the worst one! You have no idea how patient he is with me! You have no idea how much worse I used to be!"

"If any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him; for you are worse than he thinks you to be."

--Charles Spurgeon

It is by the grace of God that we are allowed to participate with him in this gospel mission. He is sufficient for these things. We can never be. So, the second we think we've got something that makes us worthy of such a calling, remember Paul, who was first to say, "Hey: this is true and trustworthy. I'm a dirt bag, but Jesus is amazing!"

3. Who is your letter?

This question is more personal. This might require some thought. So, I'll ask it again. Who is your letter of recommendation? Christ writes it, to be sure, but he writes it on the hearts of those whom you've ministered to.

And you may be sitting here and God is calling to mind people you have led in bible study or shared your faith with or maybe it's your kids or your small group. I don't know.

I've got this piece of paper. It hangs on my wall with my other "credentials" and "commendations." It is from 2007, when I became a Commissioned Minister of the Gospel at the wise age of 23 years old. It's just a piece of paper, and if not for the fact that it is signed by a dear brother who is now with the Lord, it really wouldn't hold any special significance to me—other than that it gives me a sweet break on my income taxes.

Because it doesn't actually demonstrate anything about me. Just that somebody somewhere at some point signed a piece of paper. What makes me a minister isn't that. It's y'all. It's the people I've had the privilege of serving whether officially as Pastor as a friend or neighbor or brother or as Papa.

And I say that knowing that I don't deserve it. I am not sufficient for these things. But Jesus is. And he is sufficient for you, each day, as ministers, to learn humbly with others here, to live faithfully in community, and to lead others he's given you toward godliness.

In Christ Jesus, we all have a **calling**—we are ministers of a New Covenant. We all have a **confidence**—not in ourselves but the Spirit of God working through us. And as we go, we will have **commendation**—in those the Lord brings us to serve. Not praise from the people you minister to. But the people themselves *are* the commendation.

[Closing Prayer]