

Sermon for Sunday, February 25, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"THE LETTER POSTMARKED FROM GOD"  
II Corinthians 3:1-3

Text: "...and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, not written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." I Corinthians 3:3

Are you good about writing letters? I must confess I'm not too good about writing. I have good intentions and I write a lot of letters in my mind, but I'm not too good about getting them down on paper and in the mail. Do you have that problem? But there have been times in my life when I was a good letter writer. For example, back in the spring of 1974 I was a good letter writer. I was in Switzerland for a meeting and in spite of the busy schedule we had there, I found time to write at least one letter a day. And do you know why? It was because I was very much in love! And I wanted very much to communicate with the person I cared about. Was that--or is that--true in your life? If we truly care about someone, we will want to communicate with them.

Well, God loves the world very much. The Bible tells us that God so loved the world that he gave the life of his Son upon the cross to pay for the sins of the world in order that the world could be forgiven and redeemed. So, the Bible tells us that God is a lover. I suppose that's the first verse of the Bible that most of us can remember learning--do you remember, somewhere back there in Sunday School as a little child, learning the verse, "God is love"? Yes, God is a lover--he loves the peoples of the world so much that he sent Jesus to die for that world. And if you are a lover, doesn't it mean that you send letters? That's exactly what God does. He sends letters to the world--letters that tell people God loves them--letters that tell people what God does for them--letters that tell people how much God cares. And do you know what those letters are? You! Yes, if you are a Christian and if you have given your heart to Jesus, you are God's letter to the world.

What kind of a letter are you? What sort of message does your life carry to the world from God? If the world gets you as God's letter, what will they read about God, about his love, about his concern?

In our Scripture this morning the Bible says that we are God's letters "to be known and read by all men". When the world gets its mail from God in the person of you and me, what sort of message is it getting from God? In a way, that is sort of a threatening thought, isn't it? If the world hears from God through me--through my life, my actions, my conduct, my words,--I'm not so sure they are getting the message God wants them to have! Is that true in your life? I suppose most of us want our friends, our neighbors, our loved ones to know about God. We want them to know of his life, his kindness, his forgiveness. But if God's message is coming through us, I'm not so sure that is what they are hearing! As a matter of fact, I sometimes feel that I'm more junk mail than a first class letter!

Do you really want your life to be a letter from God, a letter sent to loved ones, to the lost, to those who don't know Jesus? Do you want your life to be a message to the world that says, "here is what God can do with a lost soul--here is what God can do to clean up a bad life--here is what God can do to bring joy out of sadness, light out of darkness, hope out of despair, faith out of unbelief, goodness out of evil." Yes, would you like a life that says that? Let me tell you how to do it.

First, we have to let God take away our hearts of stone. Do you remember the story in the Old Testament about the Pharaoh who wouldn't let the children of Israel go? And do you remember why? The Bible says it is because his heart was hardened towards God. The Gospel of St. Mark tells us that sometimes the disciples didn't understand about Jesus and do you know why? The Bible says, "but their hearts were hardened." And back in the days of Paul, later on in the very chapter we read from today, he tells us that the reason the Jews did not believe in Jesus was because "their minds were hardened." (II Cor. 3:14). Back in Deuteronomy (15:7) when God told the Hebrews to care for the poor, do you know what he warned them about? He told them not to harden their hearts. And the writer of Hebrews warned us Christians, "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts..."(Hebrews 3:8)

There are a lot of us here this morning who know how God wants us to live, the kinds of persons he wants us to be, but we aren't living that way. Do you know why? It is because our hearts are hardened. There are some of us who have not committed our lives to Jesus. We use as our excuse the fact that we don't understand enough or that we don't know enough. But that's not the real reason. No, the real reason is because we don't want to live God's way. We don't want to surrender the control of our lives to Jesus. Our hearts are hardened towards God.

What about your heart this morning? If you are not living the life this morning that in your inner being you know God wants you to live, is it because your heart is hard towards God? The second chapter of the book of Acts tells how, on the day of Pentecost, Peter preached to the Jews about Jesus. Later on the Bible tells us that some of that multitude responded and the Bible goes on to say, "and there were added that day about three thousand souls." (Acts 2:41) But do you know why they responded? The Scripture says, "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart..."(Acts 2:37) They gave God their stony hearts.

So, if we want our lives to be a letter from God, the first thing we have to do is let God have the hardness of our hearts. Over in the Old Testament in the book of Ezekial, the Bible says, "I will take the stony heart out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinance and obey them." (Ezekial 11:19,20) So, to live the way God wants us to live, the first thing we have to do is to give him our stony hearts.

The second thing we have to do is this: we must surrender the control of our hearts to the Holy Spirit. Our text for this morning says, "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..." How much does God's Spirit control your life? Recently I read an illustration that compared life to an automobile. "The problem is," said the writer, "most of us have God as a spare tire in the trunk, when he wants to be the steering wheel that controls the direction of our lives." I know I have that problem--do you? I want to control my own life and my own destiny and I keep God locked up in the trunk to pull out just in case there is an emergency. Are you guilty of that, too? I suspect most of us are.

You see, when we don't have the Holy Spirit in control of our lives, the way God wants us to live seems hard. For example, God's laws put a burden on us when we try to live by them. I look at the law and it tells me some hard things to do. It tells me to love my enemy, to turn the other cheek, that I should be merciful, that I should be pure in heart, and a lot of other requirements that I find hard to keep. It tells me to be loving and kind and forgiving and generous--and that's all hard to do!

Is that your experience? When we try to follow God's laws, to do the things we ought to do, it's hard. And lest someone remind me that we no longer live under the law, but under grace, I would remind us of the words of Jesus who said, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets...but to fulfill them." And then he adds, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (See St. Matthew 5:17-20) So, when we stand under the law and try to follow it, it turns out to be impossible.

But our Scripture this morning tells us something different. It says that when we open our hearts to God's Spirit, he writes God's law on our hearts! When that happens, we do what God wants us to do not because we ought to, but because we want to.

A lot of us this morning are living as we know God wants us to live. But when we let God's Spirit write God's love on our hearts, we live as God commands because we want to. You know, it is interesting about people. Before they give their hearts to Jesus, they are afraid of all they will have to do or give up or of changes they will have to make. And that threatens them. But once they take that step and let God's Spirit control their lives, they make an incredible discovery. They discover that when the Spirit writes God's laws on their hearts, they don't want to do those things any more. As it turns out, they haven't given up anything. Those things no longer interest them because God changes the desires of our hearts.

Try that in your life and see if it doesn't work for you. Let God have your stony heart and let his Spirit control your heart. You will discover that God does indeed put his law in your heart and you truly want to do the things that please God. Do you remember how Jeremiah puts it? He writes, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts..."(31:33)

Now, there are a couple of other quick comments I want to make. The first is this: down at the post office they have a dead letter office. For whatever reason, a lot of mail just can't be delivered. The Bible says that we Christians are letters from God to be read by all men, but I'll tell you, you can't read a letter that never arrives, that ends up in the dead letter office. Is your life a letter from God in the dead letter office? It is for a lot of us. The postal service comes in for a lot of criticism today because the mail is slow or letters never arrive. God has that same problem with you and me. We are slow in arriving or we end up in the dead letter office. There are a lot of people whose names are on the roles of this church who are dead letters. I think the point is this, a letter is not much use unless it arrives. Have you arrived to your friends, your neighbors, your family, your business associates as a letter from God?

And what about this church? Are we of any use to God if we are a dead letter? Is our life as a congregation, is our witness to this city, a living letter from God, written by His Spirit?

And then the last thing I want to say is this: when you put an address on a letter so that it will go where you want it to go; and when you have put the postage on it, to be sure it doesn't end up as a dead letter, what one other thing do you do? Well, you put a return address on it.

Are you a letter from God to a lost world? If you are it means you have given your heart of stone to Jesus and it means you are letting His Spirit control your life, you are letting His Spirit write the laws of God on your heart. But it also means God has his return address on your life.

Isn't that exciting? If you belong to Jesus, God has his return address on you. You are going to return to him. You are going to heaven when you die. You have eternal life and you are going to return to Him. As St. Paul put it, "we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." (II Cor. 5:1)

Someday every piece of mail will be returned. Those without God's return address will end up in an eternal spiritual dead letter office. Those who have God's return address, will go back to Him. One way or the other the life of each of us is a letter--is yours postmarked from God?