Principles of Christian Living from the Pauline Epistles
Lesson 10
LIVING EPISTLES

Lesson Text
II Corinthians 3:2-6
2 Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men:
3 Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us,
written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in
fleshy tables of the heart.
4 And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward:
5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our
sufficiency is of God;
6 Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the
spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.

II Corinthians 5:17-21
17 Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away;
behold, all things are become new.
18 And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath
given to us the ministry of reconciliation;
19 To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their
trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.
20 Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we
pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.
21 For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the
righteousness of God in him.

Focus Verse
II Corinthians 3:2
Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men.

Focus Thought
A Christian’s life is an open book read by this world.

CULTURE CONNECTION
What Are You Reading?
by Richard M. Davis

People often ask me, “What are you reading?” A conversation will then ensue
regarding that topic or about other current books on the market. It is true that what a
person reads reveals much about that individual.

It is interesting to inquire as to what others are reading and to discuss the
associated topic, but a more significant question could be, “What are others reading in
you?” In other words, what are others seeing through the example of your life? Paul
wrote, “Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men” (II
Corinthians 3:2). Is it a frightening thought for you to think others “can read you like a book”? What kind of example are you leaving for others to follow?

Cassandra Mack, president and CEO of Strategies for Empowered Living Inc., made some important observations in her article “Be a Positive Role Model”: “Has it ever occurred to you that you may be the only positive influence on someone else’s life? Have you ever stopped to think that you may be the only example of excellence and integrity to a classmate, neighbor or friend? As strange as it may seem, people are always watching you, even if you are not aware of it. . . . When you have a vision of something greater for your life and work towards that vision you will become a positive role model for others whether you want to or not” (www.ezinearticles.com).

As Christians, our lives are open books for all the world to read. We should give those who observe us good, wholesome, and edifying examples through the lives we live.

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

We have all written letters that contain personal information we desire to be kept private. Therefore, it is somewhat unsettling to read the Scripture text of this lesson and realize our lives are like personal letters displayed for all to read. Instead of being written on tablets of stone, these letters are written on the fleshy tables of our heart—not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God.

Some label mail processed through the government postal system as “snail mail” because it is much slower than electronic mail. The Master sends His mail, however, directly to a human heart. His messages are never delayed or lost; He delivers every message to the right place and on time. Further, He knows every person’s current address, for Isaiah 37:28 says, “I know thy abode.”

In this lesson we discover that these living epistles are not merely for our own benefit, but Christ writes them on our hearts for the benefit of others. His loving authorship constrains us to serve as living testimonies to His grace and to offer salvation. In this way our lives can lead many people to Jesus Christ that they may be reconciled to Him. Not only does His love constrain us, but awe and fear of Him compel us to serve as emissaries that represent Him and continue His work in the world. The example of Paul demonstrates both his fear and his love for God that compelled him to become an ambassador of Christ.

Closing the lesson, we will discuss our role as ambassadors for Christ. The gospel and the power of God equip us to represent the kingdom of God to the lost. As the citizens of a foreign country see only the ambassador of the country he represents and not the country or its leader, the world sees only us. They do not literally see the Christ we represent, but our lives should reflect His image that they may see Him through us.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. A LETTER FROM CHRIST

My friend received what was probably a form letter. Nevertheless, he called everyone he knew, boasting, “I received a letter from the president of the United States!” We all receive letters from family, associates, and friends. Perhaps a few of us have been privileged to receive a letter from some important personality. However, nothing compares to receiving a letter from Jesus Christ.
That Christ would even consider writing us is a miracle of mercy. What would cause Him to write to us? Yet He chose to put us on His mailing list. God’s address book contains the names of everyone who has ever been born, but many have chosen not to respond to His overtures. A letter received from the Lord Jesus Christ should be a cherished memento of His grace that is manifested in the gospel. “You’ve got mail!”

A. An Epistle of Commendation

“Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you?” (II Corinthians 3:1).

In earlier times men carried letters of commendation that served to introduce and validate them and their business with potential business associates. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he rejected the idea of needing a letter of commendation to or from them. Commendation in this passage means “introduction” or “recommendation.” Apparently, he felt he did not need a formal introduction or a recommendation. His ministry alone was enough to introduce and recommend him to the Corinthians because his work with them demonstrated his integrity and left an indelible imprint upon their lives. His record served as an open letter to anyone wanting to examine or challenge his authenticity and authority.

B. An Epistle Known and Read by All Men

“Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men” (II Corinthians 3:2).

The epistle of our life is but one part of the public library of reputations. This library is open to all; no sections are closed to everyone but privileged academics. Not only is our life an open book available to all, but anyone can read it whether literate or illiterate. One does not have to be able to read to peruse the example of a person’s life. Much like the audio books we listen to while driving or working, we broadcast our lives for all to witness. As seventeenth-century poet John Donne said, “No man is an island.”

May we accept the challenge to live in such a way that we are not embarrassed to have someone read the story of our life. If we understand that everything we do and say is the material that comprises the book of our life’s story, it causes us to be more cautious and wise in our choice of words and actions. The record we leave behind becomes an indelible part of our eternal portfolio. Further, this information will confront or acknowledge us in judgment. Paul wrote, “For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. . . . So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Romans 14:10, 12).

Paul invited the Corinthians and, by extension, everyone else to read and familiarize themselves with his life’s work. He had poured all of his energies into the work of God and was not ashamed of his life. If we invest good things into the people we disciple, their lives can testify to our faithfulness. If they are not faithful to the Word of God we share with them, however, it will testify only of their unfaithfulness. We must be
sure we have done everything we could do to help others in this life. Having done so, we have nothing to fear in our record.

C. An Epistle Written by the Spirit

“Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart” (II Corinthians 3:3).

Many years ago when we started the book of our life, we were without God—empty, confused, and self-centered. If we had continued in that vein, readers would have been disappointed, if not horrified, with the regrettable ending to our story. However, when we asked the Author to write the rest of the book, He edited out our mistakes and wrote His righteousness into the story of our life by making us holy and acceptable unto Him. He added a chapter that conveyed a beautiful story of redemption. Because of Jesus Christ, our life overflowed with fulfillment, joy, and love. Readers could enjoy the book, knowing that Christ had added a glorious conclusion.

Much like the finger of God that wrote the Law on tables of stone on Mount Sinai, His finger also has written His word on the fleshy tables of our heart. Further, His writing in us has far greater value than any rare document in the secular world. Great Britain has the Magna Carta. Canada and the United States have their respective constitutions. These documents are well-known and important, but they are written by humans. However, the words the Holy Spirit writes on our heart mean freedom for our body and soul. They are like the Emancipation Proclamation because they free us from the slavery of sin.

Secular humanists are carnal and fail to recognize mankind’s need for divine help. They reason God can do nothing for an individual that he cannot do for himself. However, we who have received spiritual transformation and daily ministration by the Spirit know the erroneous position of the humanist. Psalm 39:5 says, “Every man at his best state is altogether vanity.” It is impossible for mankind to lift himself from his fallen state. He cannot save himself. Jesus is his only hope, for He said in John 10:9, “I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved.”

D. An Epistle Written in the Human Heart

Words have been written in many unimaginable places. For instance, rice writing, which began in Turkey, is the art of writing on a single grain of rice. One of the best-known rice writers was Ernest Blystone, who wrote 14,164 letters on a single grain of rice, taking ninety-eight hours to accomplish the feat.

Of all the words that have been inscribed on strange surfaces around the world, none compares with the words written on the human heart. Although God has written on stone tablets on Mount Sinai, on the plaster of a king’s banquet hall, and on the ground to prevent accusers from stoning a woman for her sin, none compares to the messages He writes on the human heart, the seat of human emotion and will.
Cardiac surgeons operate on the human heart, taking it from the chest of the patient and hooking it to a machine that keeps it beating. Before replacing it into the chest cavity, they graft veins or arteries from elsewhere in the patient’s body to improve blood flow to the heart. Despite this wondrous technical knowledge, they know nothing about the work Christ does in the heart. They hold the human heart in their hands, but they cannot see the written messages of God it contains. Further, they could not understand them even if they could see them.

The world’s false religions appeal largely to the mind. They offer counsel on disciplining the mind, instructions on how to reach a level of peace by self-denial, and advice on self-control. Conversely, Christ’s gospel reaches beyond the mind all the way to the heart. He does not write His letters only in one’s mind but also on his heart. Simply, His focus is on the heart, not just the mind.

II. A MINISTER OF RECONCILIATION

“And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation” (II Corinthians 5:18).

Reconciliation is one of the most beautiful doctrines of the New Testament. The Greek word katallage, from which “reconcile” derives, means “restoration to divine favor” (Strong’s Concordance). Salvation is the process whereby God restores His relationship with mankind, which man lost in the Garden of Eden. Scripture designates those who are involved in presenting this opportunity of restoration as “ministers of reconciliation.”

In a sense, ministers of reconciliation are peacemakers. They work to bring the repentant sinner to Christ so he or she can be reconciled to God.

A. Reconciled to Christ

Since the first sin in the Garden, which broke the relationship between God and man, mankind has needed to be reconciled to Christ. That one act of disobedience opened the floodgate of sin and caused every individual to be born under the stigma of sin.

“Wherefore . . . by one man sin entered into the world. . . . by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; . . . by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners” (Romans 5:12, 18-19).

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross opened the way for mankind to reconcile with God. He beckons the sinner to come to Him, and the relationship begins to heal when the sinner approaches through faith and obedience to the gospel. Reconciliation, then, is the fruit of salvation.

The story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 paints a beautiful portrait of reconciliation. After squandering his inheritance on riotous living, the son ended up destitute. His poverty forced him to eat the husks in the pigpen alongside the swine. When the young man came to his senses, he said, “How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants” (Luke 15:17-19).
However, the story did not end that way. When the father saw the boy approaching, his heart swelled with compassion and he told the servants, “Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:22-24).

“For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life” (Romans 5:10).

Individuals’ reconciliation to God heals their relationship not only with deity but also with humanity. For example, in Ephesians 2:14-16 Paul cited the hostile relationship between Jews and Gentiles that had existed for centuries and had continued even after the inception of the church. When both Jews and Gentiles reconciled to the Savior, however, the blood of Jesus Christ could eradicate the enmity between individual Jews and Gentiles as both allowed Christ to be their Master.

“For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby” (Ephesians 2:14-16).

B. Compelled by the Fear of God

“Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men” (II Corinthians 5:11).

While on the road to Damascus, Paul learned of the power of God and the respect God demands. This zealous young man intended to arrest and persecute the followers of Jesus Christ, but instead, he was arrested by almighty God. A heavenly light blinded him and he fell to the ground. A voice thundered from the heavens: “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” (See Acts 9:1-6.) Stunned with the realization that Jesus was God, Paul surrendered his will to the Savior. This traumatic experience, as much as any other, established in him a reverential fear of God that compelled him to persuade people of the truth he had discovered.

II Corinthians 5:11 refers to persuading men because of “the terror of the Lord.” The Greek word for “terror” in this verse is phobos, the source of the English word “phobia,” or fear. This word reveals that Paul’s fear of God was not only a reverential fear, but also one of fright and alarm. Paul’s alarming experience on the road to Damascus caused his immediate submission to the Lord, whom he now knew to be Jesus Christ.

Paul felt compelled, or forced, to reach others with the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. He did not view sharing the gospel as an arbitrary choice but as a command from God. In I Corinthians 9:16, he wrote, “For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!” However, fear was not Paul’s only source of motivation to preach the gospel; it was not even his greatest compelling force. He was constrained by the love of the Almighty.
C. Constrained by the Love of God

“For the love of Christ constraineth us” (II Corinthians 5:14).

“Constrained” also means “forced.” Paul felt forced to preach the gospel, not only by the fear of God, but also by the love of God. God’s love had worked to change Paul from a persecutor to a preacher and it became a force within him, pushing him to share the gospel with the lost.

Love seems to be the best reason for sharing the gospel. God loves us and we love Him; therefore, we want others to love Him as well. We should not look at our responsibility to share the gospel as forced any more than we are forced to love our spouse and children. Love dictates a strong sense of urgency and responsibility to reach out to the lost. When we really love someone, we respond willingly to that person’s need for help. Our love for God creates an inner impetus that motivates us to share this glorious message with others.

D. Received the Word of Reconciliation

“To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation” (II Corinthians 5:19).

The last phrase of II Corinthians 5:19 explains that God “hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.” Other translations use the word message instead of word, making the verse to read, “[He] hath committed unto us the message of reconciliation.” As disciples of Christ, we have a message that when obeyed reconciles unbelievers to Christ. We must share this vital message with everyone with whom we come into contact.

What responsibility this message of reconciliation demands! How culpable would an individual be who possessed the antidote for an outbreak of a serious disease and yet refrained from sharing that antidote? Such is our culpability if we fail to share the message of reconciliation. The gospel is the only hope for the hopeless masses. As we have received the word of reconciliation, let us share it with the lost as much as we can.

E. Reconciled by the Gospel

Sin separates mankind from God, but the gospel reconciles us to Him. The gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ—is the means to restoring our broken relationship with God. Without the gospel we have no hope of being saved. However, obeying the New Testament plan of salvation reconciles us to God and gives us citizenship in His kingdom.

The gospel is the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 15:1-4), and it is the plan of salvation for fallen humanity. Repentance identifies us with Christ’s death, and water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins identifies us with His burial. “We are buried with him by baptism” (Romans 6:4). Receiving the Holy Spirit with the initial evidence of speaking in other tongues identifies us with His resurrection, for we arise to “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).
Some individuals study and admire the beauty of the gospel without ever obeying it. It is not enough to be able to explain the theology of the gospel. It must be more than a theory; it must be a practice. We must submit to and obey the gospel message. Paul said, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith” (Romans 1:16-17).

III. AN AMBASSADOR FOR CHRIST

“Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God” (II Corinthians 5:20).

Williams’ translation renders II Corinthians 5:20, “So I am an envoy to represent Christ.” Before Christ left this earth, He told His disciples, “Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). They responded by carrying the gospel to the then-known world. Today, we still have a duty to share the gospel with our world.

An ambassador is an official representative of a country in the stead of the leader of that country. For example, the Canadian ambassador to the United States represents his nation within the United States. Conversely, the United States ambassador to Canada represents the US within Canada. The role of an ambassador is vital since the leaders of these countries cannot physically be in every country where government business requires transactions.

As ambassadors of Jesus Christ, we officially represent Him in the world today, for He is no longer here in person. Before Jesus told the disciples they would be witnesses for Him to the world, He promised to give them power when they received the Holy Ghost. (See Acts 1:8.) This power is not only the ability to perform His will but also the authority through His name. As His ambassadors, He gave us authority to carry on His work in His name. Colossians 3:17 states, “Do all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” He authorized us to represent His cause on earth.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

We discussed how Paul informed the Corinthian church that he did not need letters of commendation to validate his ministry. Neither did he need letters of commendation from them, for their lives were epistles that demonstrated to all the validity of Paul’s ministry. Likewise, our lives are open letters everyone can read. The Spirit of God writes His message on the fleshy tables of our heart. What a privilege and blessing it is to receive such correspondence from God!

As living epistles, we can serve as instruments of reconciliation between mankind and God by bringing sinners to Christ. The sinners’ obedience to the gospel restores them to divine favor. Both the fear and the love of God compelled Paul to share the gospel with the lost. As an ambassador of Christ, he felt a strong obligation to repay a debt he owed to God for the grace he had received. Like Paul, we are Christ’s ambassadors. Jesus Christ ascended from this earth, and we represent Him and His kingdom in our world.