

2 Corinthians 3

by Robert Arthur

In 2 Corinthians 3, Robert Arthur explores the role of believers as living letters of Christ, emphasizing the transformative power of the Holy Spirit over the law.

Duration: 37:01

Scripture: Romans 8:1-2, Romans 8:4, 2 Corinthians 3:1-3

Topics: "New Covenant"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes that God can only work in our lives when the Spirit of God makes Christ real in us. He explains that human nature is inherently flawed and rotten, and God cannot work with it. The preacher uses the analogy of an architect who cannot build a good structure with bad materials. He further explains that the Spirit of God uses the Word of God to convey Christ to our hearts, and through this, we can experience liberty and become transformed to be like Christ.

Transcript

I'd like to read for just a little from the same chapter that occupied me a while this afternoon, 2 Corinthians 3. I'd like to read in the early verses of that chapter, and then perhaps some at the end. 2 Corinthians 3, verse 1, do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you? You must know, I am sure, even the various newcomer to divine things, that the Apostle Paul, surely in his sojourning, often met the accusation that, well, he wasn't truly an apostle. He wasn't a real one.

He wasn't one like the others, didn't have the proper credentials. There's one translation that I sometimes refer to, and I know not its authority. I'm suspicious that it doesn't have a full authority, but it uses the word certificate.

It's as though somebody must have said to Paul often, well, where's your certificate? Of course, that's a logical enough proposition. If you go to a doctor or dentist, you invariably scan the wall. That is, if you, in the dentist's case, have sufficient strength to do so, and can look up from under his ministering hand, and you want to see that he has a certificate.

You don't want to have come inadvertently to a veterinary or something like that. You want to be sure that the man knows just exactly what he's doing. Well, I take it that there were those who said to Paul, and you'll know, of course, that he wasn't a very prepossessing fellow.

Short of stature, they say, poor of eyesight, nothing to make men aware of personality so much, but he was God's man. And when some would say, where are your credentials? Where's your certificate? Where's your ladder? For, of course, you know the word official here is just the word ladder that the apostle Paul might well retort as in verse 2, ye are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read of all men. Now, by the goodness of God, we'd like to come to something else in due time, but I rather like this.

I suppose there are those in our times, I can think of some such, who might well be accosted by men and say, look, where is your proper credential for being one of these servants of the Lord? And happy is that man who can say, by the evidence of souls raised up and an assembly raised up, there's my ladder. There's my certificate. A better certificate by far than anything framed on a wall.

There's my credentials, the living reality of men and women saved by the grace of God and raised up as an assembly. Well, so he says, and we read on, he says, for as much 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. Here I'd like to stop once again, because it seems an easy flow.

I'm sure the spirit of God is directing it. It's an easy flow from Paul saying, you're my credential ladder, to his now saying, ye are Christ's ladder. You're the ladder of Christ.

Now he's speaking that of Christians. He's speaking about a church group. I think he's speaking of Corinth, a local company of believers.

And he says, you're a ladder from Christ. I, by dint of absences from home, as is true of many another who travels in similar way, I live by ladders. I'd hardly gotten into this fair part of the world until somebody said, there's a ladder from your wife.

And that's very nice, but the unfortunate part about ladders is that it's an indication of absence. I don't write letters to her when I'm at home. I assure you I don't.

I don't come down in the morning and ask for the pad that we're now using and then send a little note to my wife and say, toast a little burnt this morning, dear, and then conduct our life by correspondence. Now, when I come nearby, the need for ladders is gone. Ladders are indicative that an absent person is projecting himself into my orbit by a ladder.

That's why Christ has sent a ladder to the world. He's an absent one. Ah, he was here once.

He came once in the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. He'd gone into the glory, and from that excellent glory he has written a ladder to the world at large. And that ladder is the life of his church, the life of God's people.

You know, as I say that, although it's not that that was to take up the major interest for tonight. As I say that, I'm made thoughtful of many a thing about a ladder, jocularly and now in the thoughts of my wife's ladder. Sometimes when she writes, she knows she scores out a word.

She'll say to me on the night that we're sitting together and she's writing someday on her mother, for example. She'll say, Bob, now, how do you spell that word? Of course, she knows I don't know, but she said, how do you spell that? And after reminding her that we have a very fine dictionary there, why, I probably tell her, and she said, oh, I thought it was wrong, and she scored it out. And then, and I'm just jocular now for it doesn't happen that way, but then I say, you're not going to send that, scored like that,

blotched like that.

Well, you know what mother will say, that's just my daughter, untidy. She's not that way at all. But, do you know, I have a notion that many a reader of the ladder that Christ has sent must certainly cast back upon the writer a reflection gathered from the kind of ladder that we are to this old world.

Often and often, I've heard it enjoyed from men, ah, yeah, there's the consistency of your Christianity. And what they really mean is, there's your Christ. I see him in unwise, and I don't like what I see.

Beloved friends, I suggest to my very heart tonight that the absent one merits the very best reflection, the truest, the most undistorted representation of what he is. For eyes are reading him, and what they read in us will reflect back on him. Ah, but, I can see I used the time.

Still, I wouldn't like to leave this because of one thing. Years ago, I heard Dr. Northcote Dex speak. I've forgotten much of what he said, but I've never forgotten one thing, and I give him the credit for a little aside on this matter that I thought was enjoyable.

He said, you know, when I read the letter, I get the sheet of paper, I write dear so-and-so, whatever, finish my letter, put in the postscript, the things I have forgotten, you know, the P.S.'s, and then I fold up my letter and put it in an envelope, gum the envelope, there's my letter. Nobody's going to read that. In fact, that's even pains to see that nobody will read it.

I have enveloped the letter with the back and front covering. Ah, said he, that's not the kind of letter that is being described in the Corinthian epistle. He said, I think rather it should be our Christ postal card.

You know what postal cards are? Here's the, now whenever I speak about this kind of thing, there's always a mailman in the audience, and I'm very sure they don't do it, but you know they get the name for doing it, that the man comes up to dear Mrs. Jones and says, your sister's calling to call this week. Well, there it is. I know a little camp that I used to enjoy in the Middle West, and the brother of Ben Tuninger made a ruling, unofficial, but it stuck, that if ever postal cards were received, they were received by the medium of reading them to all the camp.

I don't know that I'll be there soon, but when I go, don't write me any secrets, because they'll get out, they'll be read to everybody. And that's the kind of epistle that God's people are. You are Christ's epistle, known and read of all men.

I say once again, to those who are Christ, God granted by thee, grace of His enabling power, we give an undistorted representation of what Christ is by our lives. Now, I want to read on. Verse 4, And such tracts have we through Christ the Godward, not that we are sufficient of ourselves, nay, nay, I should think, already there's borne in on us the sense of an incompetence, an inability, how can anybody be enough for this? But it says, Our sufficiency, our competency, is of God, who also hath made us competent, sufficient, able ministers of the new covenant, not of the latter, but of the Spirit.

For the latter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life. Now, just a word, ere I go on reading here, I know you'll say this is a long, drawn-out reading, but I think you'll see something, that I believe I see. That the Spirit of God causes the Apostle Paul to flow from this idea of a letter of commendation, credential letter, to a letter of Christ, and then he begins to compare two written things.

He says there was an age past that had a written thing, we've heard about it tonight already, that was the law. Now, here in verse 6, I know there'd be many translations and interpretations of this, I'd rather incline to think the one that I've forgotten just whose rendering it may be, but I like it best. And it's just this, he says, We are made able ministers of the new covenant, which is not a code.

And he capitalizes the C of code, he means the code of laws from Sinai. It's not a code, it's not a transcript of particulars that we have to keep, it's not a code, but it's a spirit. And he capitalizes spirit, because the code taketh life, but the spirit giveth life.

I like that. You see, there are two written things. The law had something that was written on tables of stone.

Christ has something that's written on tables of the heart. And then out of that he makes a comparison. He says the tables of stone were a ministry of death.

They took life. They demanded life. They said do or die.

But the writing of the spirit, ah, that's different. He's the provider of life, he's not the demander. He's the provider.

Long since it was my delight to find this out. I don't know that I'm very novel in suggesting this as a divine name. But I delighted to find out one day that the spirit of God is the realizer of all the divine things that are true for God's people.

He's the spirit of realization. The law, that's the law of demand. The spirit, he's the spirit of producing.

The spirit of realizing in men and women's lives. Now for just moments now, I'd like to suggest three things that he realizes. Three things that are in this passage.

I'm not to read it all except to go down, maybe to verse 12, finish off the reading a little there. I omitted the word veil, I think right well it should be omitted there. It's the old covenant that's done away in Christ.

But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart. Nevertheless, when it, the heart, shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away. Now the Lord is that spirit.

And where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we always open or unveil faith. Beholding us in a glass, the glory of the Lord are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, evenest by the spirit of the Lord.

Now, the first thing that the spirit of God realizes. Oh, I, I'm very conscious. And never more so than perhaps when seeking to crystallize and squeeze into a narrow compass some things that perhaps are large in their content.

I'm very conscious of inability sometimes to make clarity in what I say. But here, the spirit of God is a divine person. He's not an id or an influence.

He's a divine person. Or some people say, I can't take that. It says spirit.

That means draft, that means something intangible. Ah, but he's nevertheless a divine person. Forget you not this, that Christ is the word.

Does the fact that he's the word make him less than a person? No, it doesn't. The word suggests he's an expression, something emanating from God. He is God, God coming out to men.

And the spirit is God. God coming out as that life-giving one, that life-producing one. And the spirit of God here produces three things of which I have spoken.

The first thing he does is produce life. Now, here's where I, I know my brother was on the same scripture for quite a little while, the Aids of Romans. I want you to turn to it for just the briefest compass.

Romans chapter 8, verse 1, There is therefore now no judgment, no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus. I think perhaps that most will agree that the phrase that occurs thereafter in verse 1, in perfect fact, belongs down in verse 4. The phrase is, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit. You'll notice it's down in verse 4, and that's where it belongs.

That the righteousness of the Lord might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit. The fact stands alone. There is therefore now no judgment to them that are in Christ Jesus.

My beloved brother has made more than plain the wondrous grace of God. God's riches at Christ's expense. God dealing with sin in Christ, in order that he might justify men.

And justify means declare righteousness. There's no condemnation if they're in Christ Jesus. But now here's the next little part that is explanatory of what he's just been saying.

For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. I've said this perhaps so often to young folk as to become a monogamy. This word law, in chapter 8, verse 2 of Romans, is not the word.

It is the same words about that ghost, but it's not applicable to the Ten Commandments here. He's not saying anything about the Ten Commandments as used by the spirit. What he's saying is this.

And here for a word of illustration. I remember when I studied inorganic chemistry. I make rapid confession that while being exposed, it never fully took.

I have only a very far off waving acquaintance with inorganic chemistry. But I remember some things about it that we learned, and it was enchanting to learn it. We learned that sometimes chemists in their researches noticed that certain things seemed to work in a fairly constant way.

And they made a hypothesis, a working guess. They guessed that that will always react like that, and so they made a hypothesis. And then as days passed by and weeks and months, and that reaction seemed always to go just exactly like that and never differed, then hypothesis stepped up to the realm of theory.

I remember--this will date me, of course--but we studied Dalton's atomic theory. Ah, but when theory passes beyond that and never is disproved, when it always works in that fixed, certain way, then it passes into the realm of chemical law. And here's the word law.

It's the fixed way in which something acts. It never differs. The fixed way in which the Spirit of God acts is to bring life in Christ.

He never differs. He's the producer of life. Now, of course, the next phrasing here is a somber one, one you might well ponder, and might well ponder it, every one of us, because it says that the fixed way in

which sin works is to bring death.

And it never varies. It never varies. The fixed way in which sin works is to bring death.

And I wish I could stand in some housetop place and cry it out to a meandering America who thinks that it's playing acts of sowing its wild oats and peccadilloes and they're just light things. It's the ominously difficult, dark thing of death. Spiritual death comes as the fixed way in which sin works.

Ah, but now listen. Verse 3. For what the law could not do. Now, here you have this law from Sinai.

Here you have this law of which we've been speaking already. For what the law could not do. What couldn't the law do? Well, let me beg it very quickly.

The law couldn't make a righteous man out of the stuff it had to work with. What the law could not do in that it was frustrated through the flesh. Ah, I hear somebody is bound to say to me, Now, I've been listening to Mr. Walden and now I listen to you in some little part and I hear you both say something about the law.

That it can do certain things. It can bring righteousness up. You've said again and again it's not the principle that saves you.

It's not the principle that keeps you. Well, isn't the law from God? Isn't it a holy thing? Isn't the law good? Why, yes, it's good. Yes, it's holy.

You know what's wrong? It's the stuff that the law has to work with. What's that stuff? It's an incorrigibly bad stuff. It's called human nature.

It's called the flesh. And it never can be improved. My brother has said that emphatically.

It never can be made better. I don't know that illustrations always illustrate, but I've often thought thusly, suppose I'm to build a house. I want a house, as who doesn't? And so in order to assure me that it's a good one, I get a good architect.

And after he has made a plan, I look it over and I think it's a good plan. So does he. And just when we're about ready to make the commitment, sign, seal, and deliver, you know, I say, oh, say, I want to show you the material from which I'm going to build this house.

And I take him through my backyard. And there in my backyard, I have the accumulated scrapings of leaves and everything from two or three years back. There's a nice mulch-looking effect there.

And it's heaped up with a little sawdust from the last carpeting work I did. Oh, just a conglomerate mess there. It has rained several times, you know what it does in San Francisco once in a while.

And it's just a mess. And I say, no, I want to do it. I'm going to use that.

Oh, oh, he says, that'll never do. Well, why warn it? I'm too good architect. And modestly he admits it.

Isn't the plan a good one? Well, yes, it's a good plan. But it's the stuff. It's the stuff you ask me to work with.

That would frustrate every plan. That's exactly what human nature is like, friends. Exactly what it's like.

So incorrigibly rotten that God has said, I'll have none of it. I'm through with it. Ah, but look how he did it.

I read on. What the Lord could not do in that it was frustrated through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the lightness of sinful flesh and forcing, condensing in the flesh there at that awful place where the shadows of eternity come down when Christ died on the cross, God was saying, not only is he there bearing my sins, but there's the end of that human nature, that flesh. That's God's period.

He said, I'm through. And then he brings in someone, not something more correction, but someone who produces in that heart that could never be worked upon by me, by the thing of the Lord, but produces for God the very life that he has been asking. Look at this.

That the righteousness of the Lord might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. The Spirit of God is the producer, the realizer of spiritual life. It's the fixed way in which he works.

He's the only one that can do it. He's the one that brings in the life that pleases God. Oh, I wonder tonight.

Be there in that heart here. You've come up amongst us. You've wondered not a little.

Some of the things have been an extravagance to you, past you, around you, over you perhaps. But this you're sure of now. You see that God does not, will not, cannot work with that human nature that is you.

The only way in which God will receive you is when the Spirit of God making Christ real in you comes into your heart and into your life. He's the giver, the realizer of life. I can sum up the rest in a word because time has gone down yonder in the closing verses of this 2 Corinthians 3 passage.

He's the realizer of something else, of liberty. I think I need not take moments to say much about this because earlier today I had it in review a little bit. You see, he's made a comparison about two written things, the law and the Spirit.

Moses went up Sinai's pinnacle to get the law. You remember what happened to him, by the way. He was up in the presence of God.

And when he came down, his face shone. Oh, there are stories within stories here, but I dare not take much time to tell them. His face shone.

He'd been in the presence of God. By the way, how much of God did he see? Ah, it says he saw his back part. Sometimes I wonder.

Moses went up and with all the limitations of law saw only the back parts of God and he came down with radiant meaning, radiant bearing. We who are Christians, according to this word, have the privilege of entering in where there's no veil. We shall have our blessed Lord.

We can see a fuller view of Him. And I wonder if we shine with any radiance to tell us that we've been in His presence. But then he comes down and, of course, he puts a covering over his face.

A veil. Now, if you read, and you will, of course, the Old Testament narrative that tells how he did it, you'll imagine, as I did for many a year, that he just did it because he, it was too bright for the eyes of the beholders. But the spirit of God puts an interpretation here.

He says what he did was to keep the beholders from seeing that the shine, the shine that was on his face was a fading thing. You see, it was a fading thing because it came in with a law that was a fading thing. And there are multitudes of folk who have never seen that that glory was only a passing thing because they too have never seen that the law was just a passing thing.

And he put a veil over his face. Now, as near as the Israelites can come to God is to a man with a veil over his face. A mediator with a veil in front of him.

But oh, the gladness of what Christians can do. There's no veil to shut them off from their mediator. They have liberty to come in before Christ and enjoy him.

Did you ever, I'm sure you did, hear someone say about a certain meeting, oh, that was a good meeting tonight. There was liberty. There was freedom.

And of course, all whoever dare to take up holy things and speak for God know what that means. Nights there are when I'm sure you, oh, you enjoy that luxury of such freedom from God other nights. And the reason has mystified me always.

I found nights when I sought to be prepared and prayed over it and still nothing would flow. But there you find that your heart says, I had liberty. Ah, but that's not what's being spoken of here.

He's not speaking of a night or a time, a ministry, message when there was gracious freedom because the Spirit of God was there. He's speaking about an age. He says there was an age when men couldn't get to God.

Not any nearer than to Moses was the veil. This is the age when Christians can get to Christ, can enjoy him, there's liberty. Ah, we've talked today and these days, and oh, it would be something with which I would be, I would go away with a gripping fear.

Lest anyone misunderstand, we're not speaking some heroics about visionary stuff. These things, I believe, are made real through the Word of God. The Spirit of God invariably uses the instrument of the Word of God to convey Christ to the heart.

And there's what he does. He, as it were, carries the believer in to the presence of Christ to enjoy him, and there's liberty. And then the last thing was that that occupied us today already.

There never yet was spiritual heart who set himself to be much in the presence of Christ and enjoy him. Never yet was heart that occupied itself with Christ that didn't become like the one with whom he was occupied. And here again say we, and it's an echo of what my brother said so definitely today, it's not just superficiality.

It's not just likeness done from the outside. You'll notice the word is the very same word as in Christ's transfiguration. It's reality shining out from the inside.

It's transfiguration. We've become transfigured into his likeness. The Spirit of God is going to bring realities out, but they'll only be brought out in the measure that we're in front of Christ.

I think the first of this chapter conforms to the latter part. The letter that is Christ's letter will only show as much of Christ to the eye of the beholder as is written on the heart of the one who is a part of the letter. There'll only be as much of Christ's shine out as is brought into focus and reality by the Spirit of God when

he keeps us in front of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ.

I've taken more than my rightful time. May God tonight speak with all his gracious power through the wooing, tender, sweet ministry of the Spirit of God to any heart that may be here and knows not the reality of peace with God. May that heart tonight, by a simple trust in our Lord Jesus Christ, know him as the life-giver in every heart, the heart of Christ.

Be arrested, sweet, peaceful heart, because the Spirit of God is writing more clearly than ever the reality of peace.

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